Unlimited Fafnir Volume 1

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ドラゴンズ・エデン

銃皇無尽のファフニールI

ツカサ
Illustration
梱枝りこ

講談社ラノベ文庫

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ドラゴンズ・エデン

ツカサ

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突如現れたドラゴンと総称される怪物たちにより、世界は一変した——。やがて人間の中に、ドラゴンの力を持った“D”と呼ばれる異能の少女たちが生まれる。存在を秘匿された唯一の男の“D”である少年・物部悠は、“D”の少女たちが集まる学園・ミッドガルに強制的に放り込まれ、学園生の少女イリスの裸を見てしまう。さらに生き別れの妹・深月と再会した悠は、この学園に入学することになり……!?「本当にどうしようもなくなったら、俺がイリスを——殺してやる」「信じて……いいの？」最強の暗殺者になるはずだった少年と、落ちこぼれの少女が繰り広げる、“たった一つの物語”が幕を開ける——！　アンリミテッド学園バトルアクション！

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ドラゴンvs美少女

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銃皇無尽のファフニール

I

ツカサ

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梱枝りこ

「モノノベが喜ぶなら、見せてあげてもいいよ？
ずっと……何かお礼をしたいなって思ってたの」

イリスはそう言ってネグリジェの裾を指で摘まむ。
否応なく俺の視線はそこに吸い寄せられた。
え？　おい、ちょっと待て――。
息を呑む。鼓動が速くなる。無意識に唾をごくりと呑み込んだ。

「終の矢――空へ落ちる星！」

『五閃の神弓！』

拮超そ虹
超重力と斥力場が
そう、今ならきっと届く。
虹色に輝く弓に深月は上位元素の矢を番えた。
拮抗している今ならば！

「え、えっちなこと……するつもり？」

物部悠
Yuu Mononobe

「あとは――俺に全部任せとけ」

物部深月
Mitsuki Mononobe

「わたくし、まだ納得したわけではありませんからね！」

リーザ・ハイウォーカー
Lisa Highwalker

「――いいんですよ。私の手は、もう汚れているんですから」

イリス・フレイア
Iris Freyja

銃皇無尽のファフニール

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Prologue

Crushed. The familiar landscape, the neighbouring town across the river—had been trampled.

The skies shook. The ground gave way, swallowing up houses, cars, trees.

Those tremors even reached the boy on an overlook of a distant hill, etching cracks into the concrete by his feet.

"Go away... please go away..."

Beside the boy, a girl cried. Collapsed on the ground, she begged as tears flowed down her face.

Begged towards the being that had tread over the neighbouring town.

But there was no way that the voice from such a tiny human would reach.

The giant foot that easily flattened a whole town. The long arm that lightly swept away mountains. The head, hidden within clouds, invisible.

It was a large, unbelievably large thing.

One of the supernatural creatures called *dragons*.

In particular, the blue dragon—Hekatonkheir.

Though it was named after the legendary giants, probably the only similarity it shared with humans was that it walked on two feet.

Its whole body was covered with blue scales, and when it moved a part of the scales lit up, forming a strange pattern. Furthermore the head that occasionally peeked out from the gaps in the clouds had neither eyes nor a nose nor a mouth, instead there existed just a single horn-like bulge.

There was no way to label such a being under the existing biological classification framework. That was why it was a *dragon*.

The blue dragon that wandered the world on its whim—the headless giant.

Unfortunate towns that end up in its path can do nothing but wait to be destroyed. Those who lived there could only run away before they were crushed.

However, the girl was the only one who did not turn away from the giant. She was the only one that headed towards the overlook in order to face the monster.

The boy had come to bring the girl back, but what he had witnessed there was the *battle* between the girl and the giant.

"Gooo Awaaaaaaaaay——!!"

The girl screamed. Raising her head, staring at the giant, she squeezed her voice out.

As she did so, a black sphere appeared in front of the girl's eyes, and shot towards the giant.

A few seconds later, a bright flash filled the world and the air shook. When colour returned to the surroundings, a part of the giant's left arm and flank had disappeared, as if gauged out.

However, that lasted but a brief moment.

As the girl took another breath, the left arm and flank had returned to normal.

"...!"

Even then the girl continued to glare at the giant, biting down on her teeth.

"Mitsuki—why don't you give up?"

The boy called to her in a calm voice.

"There's no way I can... give up."

Hoarsely the girl replied.

"But why? Our parents have already evacuated. Everyone else have probably long since escaped too. There's nothing that you need to protect like—"

"There is! Our house is still there! That town is where our family belongs!!"

Covering the boy's voice, the girl yelled.

The giant seemed to be getting ready to take yet another step. In front of it was the town that the boy and the girl had lived in for thirteen years.

Six years as neighbours, and seven years as family, the two had lived together.

"...I see."

With a small sigh, the boy patted the girl on the head.

The girl looked up towards the boy with a confused face.

"Nii-san?"

"Leave *everything* to me."

Even now, three years later, the girl did not understand what had happened then.

But it was true that the boy had fulfilled his words.

He drove away Hekatonkheir, saved the town, and shouldered the result all by himself.

It was not until afterwards that the girl realized what the thing she most wanted to protect was.

Not until after she had lost the boy—.

Chapter 1 - Dragon Garden Midgard

Part 1

I couldn't help but feel dizzy from the massive dissonance between the scenery before me and the world I used to live in.

Clear blue skies. A navy-blue sea. A white beach. Coconut trees in the breeze. This tropical island scene was like a drawing.

Because it was too hot, I took off my long-sleeved jacket, leaving just a shirt, then looked out to sea.

"Am I dreaming...?"

I muttered to myself while listening to the sound of waves.

This suspicion rapidly turned into certainty.

Because a girl suddenly appeared out of the sea.

Beautiful silver hair, dripping wet, was glittering brightly from reflecting the dazzling sunlight. Droplets of water slid over clear, flawless snow-white skin, flowing along gentle curves.

Without wearing anything at all, she was walking on the beach nude.

Roughly the same age as me, probably fifteen or sixteen years old.

It really had been too long since I last saw a girl of my age, so I had no idea how to react.

However, I could not tear my eyes away from that snow-white, naked body. Seeing bulges that flashed in and out view between gaps in the silver hair, wobbling as the girl walked, I could not help but gulp.

"Yeah... This has to be a dream."

I sighed.

This kind of scenery could not possibly be reality. I must be quite exhausted.

Then at least before I fall asleep, allow me to enjoy this paradise. Because once the dream ended, the usual dark and gloomy world must be waiting for me again.

After thinking that, I stared at the naked girl.

Her beauty was akin to a fairy's—a kind of otherworldly charm detached from the mundane world. I was mesmerized by that beautiful figure.

Perhaps noticing my gaze, the girl turned her head to look in my direction.

Then the girl stopped moving.

Meeting her gaze, I felt extremely nervous, but since this was a dream, there was no need to panic. Anway, I lifted my hand first to greet her.

"H-Hi, the weather's so nice today."

The girl's face instantly froze.

"Ky..."

"Ky?"

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!?"

The girl went bright red in the face and screamed. Then covering up the front of her body with her arms, she squatted down on the spot.

I was rooted to the spot by this shrill scream almost splitting my eardrums in pain.

What could one say? This was a very normal response, not the slightest like a dream. Were I dreaming, developments ought to be... of a more sultry nature, right ?

In other words, no way—

"This island and you... They're all real?"

"Y-You, w-what are you talking about? No, I should be asking why is there a man here!?"

Staring into my eyes, the girl's gaze conveyed not only shame but also fear.

This was apparently no dream. In that case, I definitely wronged her.

If this was reality, this island down south—Midgard—was indeed supposed to be completely free of men. One could hardly blame this girl for being so unguarded. I should have realized earlier.

"Oh... Ummm, sorry, actually—"

I apologized to her, but just as I was about to explain the whole story, the girl interrupted me and yelled loudly:

"C-Caduceus!!"

Using one arm to shield her well-shaped bust while raising the other arm towards the sky, she manifested a black sphere on her palm, which then turned into a silver-white staff.

"Dark matter transmutation...!?"

I stared wide-eyed in amazement but quickly understood that this was nothing worth getting surprised over.

Because every child at Midgard was a "D"—a superpower-wielding candidate for the Counter-Dragon Squad.

"I-I can do this... I'll take care of you, a mere intruder!"

Speaking in a trembling voice, the girl pointed the front end of her staff at me.

"Hey—!?"

I noticed that the girl was about to attack using her superpowers.

So-called dark matter was an energy substance that only Ds were capable of producing, which could be converted into any material or phenomenon. If she conjured high-temperature flames, instantly burning me to ashes would not be impossible.

If what she intended to unleash was a wide-area attack , even trying to defend or evade would be pointless.

—I instantly felt my hairs stand on end.

In the depths of my consciousness, the originally slumbering monster woke up at this time.

This monster was deeply rooted in my subconscious.

When confronted with a crisis of life and death, instinct would calculate multiple patterns to *strike preemptively*.

Automatically selecting the most efficient and certain means of attack, the body would take action as though reflexively.

Recognizing the girl as an enemy, the monster of my subconscious brandished its claws at her.

Without changing my posture, merely raising my right hand by the minimum amount—

"Eeek!?"

Seeing fear surface on the girl's face, I instantly came back to my senses.

—At this rate, she will die. I was going to kill her.

My mind recognized this fact.

But time did not afford the luxury of changing my method of attack. If I did that, her attack would surely take my life first.

Instinct was insisting on the legitimacy of its actions, but I screamed in my heart to oppose instinct.

—*What does my own life matter!?*

Using rationality, I forced my subconscious action to stop, canceling the attack against the girl.

"Kuh..."

Muscles screamed while bones creaked from forcible exertion.

Perhaps due to coercive suppression of subconscious responses, my nervous system fell into disarray for a moment, rendering my body unable to follow the next order.

Although my brain was currently searching for other methods of reacting, my arms and legs failed to keep up with my thoughts.

Without missing out on the opening presented by the halt in my motion, the girl yelled loudly:

"I won't lose!"

Multiple black spheres could be seen manifesting near the staff's tip.

Since I had shown murderous intent towards her at one point, it was unlikely that she would show mercy towards me.

Chances of my surviving this wave of attacks were very low.

—Even so, this was my choice too.

Telling myself that, I quietly prepared myself.

However—

BOOM!!

The expected explosion happened under the girl's feet instead.

"Kyahhhhhhhhh..."

Raising a tall cloud of dust, the girl was blown into the air. Her shrill scream gradually faded into the distance.

Sand and soil fell in the surroundings like rain while the girl fell into the sea.

—Splash.

Then she did not float up again.

"Hey...? Hey hey hey!"

I ran towards the sea. While running, I removed my shirt then jumped into the clear seawater.

Fortunately, the seawater was clear and transparently, allowing me to swiftly locate the gradually sinking girl.

Picking up the apparently unconscious girl in my arms , I returned to the beach.

Unconscious people usually felt very heavy, but the girl's body was far lighter than imagined—far softer too.

"She shouldn't have died... Right?"

Laying the girl down on the beach, I examined her condition. No external injuries. The earlier explosion probably happened underground in the sand.

My gaze shifted downwards. Almost staring straight at the girl's bosom, I hastily turned my gaze away, but discovered a strangely shaped birthmark near the side of her abdomen.

"Is this... a dragon mark?"

A so-called dragon mark was an emblem that all Ds were born with. That mark on the girl's body did not resemble the kind caused by abrasive wounds.

Then trying to check her breathing, I brought my face close to hers.

The girl proceeded to open her eyes suddenly.

"Eh...?"

Our eyes met at extremely close range.

Only after inspecting at such a close distance did I realize that her face was very well-proportioned. Added to that was her head of silver hair and flawlessly clear skin.

Such sublime and otherworldly beauty, like a work of art, it made me stare in mesmerization—

"So pretty..."

The words slipped out of my mouth unintentionally.

"W-What what what..."

Lying on the sand, the girl went red in embarrassment, her lips trembling nonstop.

But she suddenly regained her senses. Using her left arm to cover her chest, she pointed at me with her right hand.

"H-Hold on!"

I held her arm down and straddled her, sealing off her movements.

"L-Let me go! Molester! Pervert!"

"I'm neither a molester nor a pervert, nor an intruder! Could you please listen to my explanation!?"

Although I was aware that such words should not be said while pinning a naked girl down on her back, I knew there was no way I could withstand more explosions from her.

"Q-Quit lying! I won't be tricked! Because Midgard is not supposed to have men!"

"I was brought here! I was stuffed into a shipping container along with supplies to be transported here!"

Last night, I suddenly received a reassignment order. Without receiving detailed explanations, I was taken to a container.

Then I was left behind in that dark and rocking container for a number of hours. When the container was finally opened, I already found myself on this tropical island.

The ship that had delivered the container was no longer in sight. I found myself surrounded by autonomous work robots.

I wandered all over the place in search of people but ran into this naked girl.

"I can't believe you hid inside a container to sneak in here... Y-You must be a professional spy, right?"

"No, I said I was stuffed into a container, right? And even if I managed to sneak in, it's impossible to bypass the security system here. Do you really think the concentric defensive system named Midgardsormr, legendary for being impregnable, is that easy to breach?"

I calmly reprimanded her, but the girl still retorted defiantly.

"B-But humans have infinite potential!"

"How did that even occur to you!? Besides, if I'm an experienced spy, I wouldn't be hanging out leisurely at the beach, right!?"

"I-It could be a trap too! Your goal is to lure someone out... Oh no!? Am I going to be silenced!? I'll be tortured, forced to give up information, then finally killed!?"

The girl went pale, falling into despair on her own.

"Listen to me! I won't silence you nor kill you!"

—That's right, I absolutely won't kill her. Even if my body moved on its own like earlier, I would still subdue it through willpower.

"T-Then you wouldn't by any chance intend... t-to do obscene things to me?"

The girl's face gradually turned from pale to red. Seeing that kind of reaction from her, I felt rather

troubled too. It forced me to become aware of the supple body that I was touching, the fragrance of maidenly scent , as well as the lovely shape of her twin peaks.

I had no intentions of that sort, but my face naturally heated up.

"I-I said I won't do anything..."

"Liar! Your face is going red!"

"Why are you so sharp when it comes to this kind of thing!?"

I sighed deeply after retorting. This would take forever at this rate. In any case, I had to deliver the necessary explanations first.

"I am Mononobe Yuu. I belong to NIFL, the military organization directly under Asgard's command. Rank: 2nd Lieutenant. I was reassigned to Midgard, effective today. The official document is here."

I took out the drenched document from my pants pocket. To avoid damaging it, I carefully spread it open for her to read.

The girl's eyes widened in surprise.

"Mononobe, Yuu... You really are... a soldier? Not a pervert?"

After inspecting the document carefully for a while, the girl asked me.

"Correct."

From an intruder to a pervert, her choice of words to describe me was getting worse, but I deliberately ignored it.

"You said you're a 2nd Lieutenant... You... Mononobe, how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"I-Isn't that the same as me!? It would be understandable for a D, but for most soldiers, getting a rank of 2nd Lieutenant at this kind of age is too unusual!"

"Even if you say it's unusual, it's the truth. Nothing I can do about that. So, what's your name?"

"...Huh?"

"I already given you my name. I'd appreciate it if you could introduce yourself too."

After I urged her, the girl finally spoke despite her hesitation.

"...I am Iris Freyja. Student No. 7 in Brynhildr Class. Rank is... Private 2nd class, no wait, the students aren't NIFL soldiers so there's no rank hierarchy between us!"

"Yeah, that's right. Midgard is just a school. Rank is irrelevant."

"G-Glad you know that."

The girl—Iris—nodded, apparently relieved.

"So, Iris, now that we've introduced ourselves, I think the misunderstanding is over... You won't attack me again, right?"

"Oh... Right."

Iris nodded a little absentmindedly. Hence, I released her arm and stood up. Picking up the shirt I removed before jumping into the sea, I handed it to her.

"Anyway, put this on first. Otherwise, I won't know where to look."

Casting my gaze out towards the distant horizon, I suggested.

"...T-Thank you."

With a complicated expression on her face, Iris put on my shirt. Thanks to the relatively long hem, at least it covered up the lower part of her body that was not meant to be seen.

"Umm, I'm very sorry. I shouldn't have approached the beach so casually. In this place free from the male gaze, I should've expected that there might be girls going skinny dipping."

After all, I was the one at fault, so I bowed my head and apologized again. However, Iris tilted her head and said:

"Eh? Even if it's only girls, we don't go skinny dipping either, because that's too indecent."

"...What? But unless I'm mistaken, you weren't wearing a swimsuit just now, were you?"

Frowning, I looked at Iris who had been completely nude until just now.

"Oh, my swimsuit got swept away by the sea. While I was swimming, it somehow came loose without my noticing it... That's why I dove into the sea to see if it got caught somewhere."

Iris replied matter-of-factly. Recalling the earlier explosion, I reached the conclusion that this girl—

"—Iris, you're quite careless, aren't you?"

"I-I am not careless! I'm neither an idiot, nor an airhead , nor useless!!"

"I never went that far..."

It looked like I had poked her in a sore spot.

Idiot, airhead, useless—

I felt like I was starting to understand Iris as a person. Despite no similarity in appearance, Iris' earnest personality was actually quite similar to a certain girl.

"Eh!?"

Then I heard Iris make a strange sound.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"D-Don't ask me... It's because you suddenly showed a gentle smile, it frightened me..."

Iris answered with her face gone red for some reason.

"I was smiling just now?"

"...Yes."

Iris nodded, answering somewhat uncomfortably.

"Oh... I smiled because I was reminiscing, so don't mind me."

I tried to sweep things under the rug ambiguously. It was not something to discuss with someone I just met.

"What did you recall, Mononobe?"

"...Secret."

"Eh, what's wrong with telling others?"

Because Iris insisted on prying, I resorted to changing the subject.

"—What's important right now is that neither of us are in decent attire. If possible, Iris, I hope you can change back into your own clothes and give my shirt back."

Iris was wearing just my shirt whereas I was topless. Under such circumstances, any sort of misunderstanding could arise.

"Ehhh!? Mononobe, you want me to give you clothing that I've worn!? No way! No way no way no way! Impossible! You're going to sniff the lingering scent and lick it all over, aren't you!?"

"I'm not doing that!! What's scary is your imagination!"

"Monobe the molester! Mononobe the pervert! Huh? Speaking of which, her family name is Mononobe too—"

Refusing to let me explain, originally making a noisy fuss with her face gone red, Iris suddenly came back to her senses, her head tilted in puzzlement.

As it so happened at this moment, a calm voice interrupted our conversation.

"Iris-san, could you please not use other people's family name to scream pervert or molester? Even though I know you are clearly not referring to me, it feels very unpleasant."

Simultaneously, Iris and I looked in the voice's direction.

A girl in school uniform was standing on the tall breakwater separating the beach from the road. With her long black hair fluttering in the sea breeze, the girl slowly walked down the steps leading to the beach.

"No way..."

Whether in facial appearance or voice, this girl greatly resembled a certain person I knew.

But she could not possibly in a place like this. Only she could not possibly be here.

Because that was why I had—

But my flimsy hope was shattered by what Iris said next.

"Oh! M-Mitsuki-chan! S-Sorry... Speaking of which, your family name is Mononobe too, Mitsuki-chan, I forgot because I always call you by name..."

Feeling guilty, Iris scratched her head and apologized.

Ahhh... So it really was true.

In fact, I already knew the instant I laid eyes on her. I could not possibly be mistaken. I simply refused to believe it no matter what.

"Mitsuki..."

It took all I could to force these words out when she came over to me. Holding the hem of her skirt between her fingers, she bowed elegantly then said:

"I have been waiting for you the whole time. It has been three years—Nii-san."

Part 2

Twenty-five years ago, without any prior warning, a gigantic unidentified creature appeared in the sky above Japan.

The first dragon, possessing the power to generate dark matter.

A monster beyond common sense, bringing massive calamity to various locations simply by the act of moving , it vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

Later on, the international organization Asgard, established specifically to handle dragons, announced that the gigantic creature was very likely the same type as "the enveloper" Vritra recorded in ancient Indian scripture.

Although Asgard had not publicized evidence to support this assertion, on grounds of confidentiality, thereafter, the first dragon came to be known as the black dragon—"Black" Vritra.

Ever since, people possessing the same power as Vritra—the ability to generate dark matter—began to be born among humans. These superpowered children were called Ds, or Type Dragon. Currently, they were all gathered at a certain place to be managed and protected.

And this place was my current location—Midgard.

A small remote island, several kilometers in diameter, far south of Japan. Remodeled thoroughly from a formerly uninhabited island, it was rebuilt as an educational institute.

The island was surrounded by the autonomous concentric defense system named Midgardsormr, which would mercilessly eliminate all unauthorized ships and aircraft.

I was redeployed to somewhere like this, simply because of a reassignment order.

"Say, Mitsuki, it's time for you to answer me, right? What on earth... What happened?"

I walked over to ask Mitsuki who was in front.

"There are appropriate times and venues for talking. This type of road where anyone could overhear us is not a place suitable for holding discussions."

Mituski rejected my question without looking back. I had already asked her many times, always getting the same reply. It even felt like I was listening to a pre-recorded voice.

I gave up as a result to wait for the "appropriate venue " that she mentioned.

Currently, we were following the beach from earlier, walking along a road on the shore. Although no people could be seen in the surroundings at all, Mitsuki still seemed worried about "walls have ears."

As a side note, Iris had already left. Taking her belongings that were on the breakwater, she had run away as though fleeing, still wearing my shirt as well. It looked like she really did not want to give me clothing she had already worn.

Hence, I was forced to put on the long-sleeved jacket I had initially taken off due to the heat. Being knife-proof, the jacket locked heat within its thick fabric, making me sweat like a dog.

Soon after, I saw a large building. Despite a modern design, it gave me an impression like a medieval castle. Mitsuki stopped in front of the building then placed her hand on a sensor panel next to door. Almost silently, the door opened automatically.

I followed Mitsuki indoors. As cool wind blew away the heat from my body, I instantly stopped sweating.

The entrance area was a vast hall. Taking care of all house chores, cylindrical robots were sweeping and vacuuming as fully autonomous servants.

"So grand... Is this the school?"

As I muttered to myself, I immediately heard a chuckle .

I turned my gaze to Mitsuki ahead, only to see her cough once then turn to face me.

"—No, this is not the school. These are my personal living quarters."

"Huh?"

I was instantly stunned by what Mitsuki had said.

"...P-Personal living quarters? All of this crazy big building?"

"Yes, all of it is for my use, which is why I replied to you that way."

In other words, this was apparently the "appropriate venue" mentioned by Mitsuki. I stared in disbelief to check out the interior of this building. The hall opened up to the third floor with an extremely high ceiling. It was hard to imagine how many rooms exactly there were inside.

"Why are you living in this kind of house—No, speaking of which, why are you at Midgard? This time, you can finally give me an answer, right?"

"That is because I am a special D. Brynhildr Class, Student No. 3, Midgard Academy's student body president as well as captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad. Rank: Lieutenant Colonel. I have attained higher levels of greatness than you, Nii-san."

"What..."

I was dumbstruck from surprise. Mitsuki continued:

"Nii-san, the personnel transfer of reassigning you to Midgard was accomplished using my authority. Starting tomorrow, Nii-san, please study at this school as a student. A room in this dormitory has already been renovated for your use. Your uniform is also ready inside

there, so please try it on first. If by any chance the size does not fit, I shall immediately send it away for alterations."

"H-Hold on! You're asking me to study at this school starting tomorrow? Are you for real? So this so-called personnel transfer isn't about a position in the coast guard?"

"Of course I am serious. How could I serve as a role model for all the other students if I were to lie as the student body president? Midgardsormr is sufficient as defense already. No other personnel is needed."

"No... But I'm a guy!"

I pointed out the most important problem.

For some unknown reason, all Ds were female, which meant that the students in Midgard were inevitably girls only. In other words, Midgard was an all-girls school, not a place where I could study.

"There is only one eligibility requirement to receive an education at Migard—namely, one must be a D. You fulfill this requirement, Nii-san. Being female or male is irrelevant."

Indeed. I was the sole exception.

I was the male D whose existence was concealed the moment I was discovered.

"Maybe you're right, in theory... but is it really okay to publicize my circumstances? Asgard sent me to NIFL because they wanted to cover up the existence of someone like me, right...?"

The international organization Asgard was established twenty years ago to handle various cross-border issues related to dragons. Currently, there were two divisions under its banner.

One was the military organization NIFL, in charge of researching weaponry and tactics for fighting dragons, as well as taking measures against the dragon disasters happening daily.

The other was the Midgard, the autonomous educational institute of the Ds.

Reportedly, Midgard had been under NIFL's administration until recently, but currently, the two sides stood on diametrically opposite stances.

Due to the system of conducting join operations with NIFL under Asgard's command during emergency situations, students like Mitsuki and Iris were assigned military ranks common to NIFL.

In this kind of organizational hierarchy, I believed that even Mitsuki could not oppose Asgard's decisions as a Lieutenant Colonel, but...

"No, hiding your existence was not Asgard but NIFL. Taking advantage of the pretext of ensuring your safety, Nii-san, they decided on your treatment on their own without reporting back to Asgard. It was due to this that... it took me an extremely long time to locate you, Nii-san."

Mitsuki gnashed her teeth in chagrin.

"Mitsuki... You've been searching for me the whole time?"

"Yes, I was so surprised not to see when I first arrived at Midgard. It felt very odd that you were not here despite being taken away before me, so thereafter, I have been searching for you."

Despite Mitsuki's explanation, I still felt a bit worried.

"You must've used quite forceful means, right? Won't that worsen your position—"

"Worry not, it was NIFL that took unilateral action, hence there is no need to worry about them complaining on our door. Please enjoy your school life, Nii-san."

Although Mitsuki was making a face that read " absolutely no problem," I still found myself unable to agree candidly.

"Well, I basically understand the situation now and I'm very happy about your good intentions... But in practice, there are still many problems, right?"

Even if uncertain factors had decreased slightly, the fact of my gender as a man still remained.

"—Indeed, of course I have considered the many issues arising from mixing a boy into an all-girls school. Precisely because of that, I have decided to manage you myself, Nii-san."

Mitsuki made a look as though she understood my worries perfectly and nodded proudly.

"M-Manage?"

"To prevent you from disrupting public morals, Nii-san, I will supervise you properly and work hard to prevent you from causing problems. I will not allow you to engage in such shameless behavior as earlier."

Mitsuki smiled for the first time, but it was one that made me shiver from the bottom of my heart.

"Mitsuki, are you actually... angry?"

Mitsuki had not brought up the matter of Iris wearing nothing but a shirt in my presence. I originally thought she had missed the worst scene—me pinning down the naked Iris—so I was feeling relieved, but actually, Mitsuki was simply waiting for the opportunity to confront the whole matter.

"Of course, because your indiscretions are my responsibility, but I cannot believe that you started accosting girls as soon as you arrived... I fear for a terrible future."

"I-I was not accosting!"

"Is that so? But the two of you were flirting quite intimately despite having just met."

Mitsuki turned around and started walking without looking back.

"Where are you going, Mitsuki?"

"...I will take you to your room. Follow me."

Giving off an aura of displeasure, Mitsuki led me to the far end of the corridor on the first floor, the room on the right side

Every room was labeled with a numbered plate, except for that one room whose plate read "Nii-san" in bubbly handwriting.

"..."

I looked at Mitsuki silently, hoping she could change it to my name at least, but having grown up, my little sister had no intention of understanding me. Coldly, she presented a key to me.

"This is the room key. Although you may lock it with this, I do hold a master key in my possession, so please be aware of that."

"Uh, then what's the point of locking the door?"

"Please think of it as a matter of mood, but unless there was an emergency, I will not open the door without consent, so I suppose it is not entirely pointless."

"In that case, I'll accept it first..."

I took the key with uneasy feelings.

"I mainly use the room that happens to be located directly above yours in the corner of the second floor. Please knock on my door if you need anything. You may move around freely in this dormitory, but going out is forbidden after 8pm. The housework robots will prepare breakfast and dinner at the dining hall on the third floor every day at 7am and 7pm respectively. Laundry should be placed in the basket then put out in front of your door. The bath and toilet are inside the room. These are basically the rules. Any questions?"

"Uh... Nothing right now—"

Listening to so much all at once, my mind still had yet to organize all this information. Neither did I have the time to come up with questions.

"Is there anything you feel concerned about, Nii-san? For example, during these three years at NIFL... You were unable to contact Father, Mother and friends at school, right?"

"—Right, oh by the way, how are Father and Mother?"

As a matter of obligation, I inquired of the parents whom *I could not even remember their appearances clearly*.

"Yes, they are well. I do talk to them by phone occasionally. Although communications with the outside world requires authorization, it is not forbidden. Nii-san, you should take the initiative to call them next time."

"...Sure."

Despite nodding in agreement, I had no intention of calling my parents, because as soon as I talk to them, I would definitely get exposed.

I did not want Mitsuki to know what I had lost three years ago.

"You may also call friends, Nii-san, but the phone calls will be recorded, so please take care not to say anything unnecessary. If you do not have their phone numbers, I could also help you look for them."

"Got it, thanks for doing so much for me."

—Friends? While wondering whether I had people like that, I thanked her.

"Then I shall excuse myself."

Mitsuki took a bow, turned around and was about to leave when I thought of a burning question to ask.

"Oh—Can I ask a question?"

"What question?"

Mitsuki halted and looked back at me. I gulped, steeled myself and raised the following question:

"What I did three years ago... was it a waste? Was it ultimately just a child's naive thinking?"

Three years ago, I stepped out to fight. *To prevent Mitsuki from being sent to Midgard*, I had claimed that everything was my doing.

I insisted that *I was the only one* who had fought the giant.

However, seeing as Mitsuki was in this place now...

That meant that my action had ended up futile.

However, Mitsuki shook her head slowly.

"No, Nii-san, your efforts were definitely not a waste. Three years ago, my being a D did not come to light, but.."

"But?"

"I committed an error back then—An irrevocable error."

Saying that, Mitsuki smiled sadly.

Part 3

Mononobe Mitsuki was my sister, but we were not blood related.

I became part of her family as an adopted son back when I was six. We were in the same year in school because our birthdays differed only by a month. Even so, Mitsuki still insisted on calling me "Nii-san."

This rigid personality remained unchanged even now, but apart from that, everything else differed quite substantially from my recollections.

Three years ago, she spoke in a more childish manner. Furthermore, she was shy and introverted, and disliked showing herself in public.

Standing fearlessly in front of everyone to give a speech like this was something beyond her in the past.

"...Hence, despite being male, more importantly, he is a D—in other words, one of our rare comrades. Only by accepting him as one of us without gender discrimination would we prove that we are humans with a highly developed sense of social awareness—"

The current location was the school gym at the center of the island. All students were arranged neatly in rows while the faculty was lined up along the wall. On the other hand, Mitsuki was standing on the podium with everyone's gaze gathered on her, speaking fluently through the microphone.

Standing beside her, I was dressed in the school uniform, similar in style to the other students, but mine was a male uniform of course. The size fitted me to a frightening degree.

"—Naturally, even so, I believe there will still be many worrying issues. Hence, I hereby promise everyone that I will do everything I can to protect your daily lives. Although he is my brother, precisely because he is family , I shall deliver even harsher punishment if he were to cause trouble—"

The current full-school assembly was being held to explain my transferring into Midgard.

After yesterday's commotion, I was roused from bed early in the morning and suddenly brought to this place. (As a side note, Mitsuki had used the master key to open my door.)

When I stood up on the podium together with Mitsuki, inquisitive gazes gathered on me—But right now, all eyes were on Mitsuki. Everyone was listening attentively to her with no one whispering among themselves.

—She really was the student body president.

I felt impressed in my heart. Based on the atmosphere, I could feel everyone's respect and trust in her.

I swept my gaze across the students who were gazing at Mitsuki with fervent eyes. The students were not that many. Since I had nothing to do after all, I counted them. A total of sixty-five. Forming lines of between five to nine students, there was a total of nine lines. Perhaps that was the number of homerooms.

I had heard before that Midgard's homerooms were divided in consideration of combat teams, hence they were relatively small in class size.

The silver-haired girl, Iris, who had gotten into a dispute with me yesterday, was standing in a line of five on the very side. That line seemed particularly short in number, perhaps due to Mitsuki's absence. I remembered both of them saying they were in Brynhildr Class.

"—I hope everyone will give him a warm welcome and at the same time, I demand that he return the sincerity and trust we have extended to him. So please look after him—please look after my brother."

Mitsuki took a deep bow and ended her speech. Thunderous applause instantly sounded throughout the gym.

"Here, Nii-san."

Amidst the subsiding clapping, Mitsuki handed the microphone to me.

"Uh... My name is Mononobe Yuu. I may not be good at anything, but please be kind to me, everyone."

I did not expect myself to be so pathetic, only able to give such an unbelievably cliched greeting due to nervousness.

But the applause was even louder than before and I could hear heartwarming cheers of "Nice to meet you!" " We will look after you!"

They were supposed to be quite opposed to the idea of a boy enrolling in their school, but with just a ten-minute speech, Mitsuki altered the student's perceptions.

The two of us bowed and withdrew behind the curtains on the stage. Mitsuki exhaled deeply and smiled.

"With this, the school should exhibit a friendly atmosphere towards you, Nii-san, but please do not mess it up, okay?"

"S-Sure, I got it. I'll be careful and not cause you trouble, Mitsuki."

To be honest, my mind had yet to catch up to the situation, but the transfer to Midgard was an official order whereas Mitsuki was my superior. I had no authority to decline.

Everyone must follow orders issued from above. This was common sense ingrained in my mind during the past three years.

Perhaps my answer sounded half-hearted, hence Mitsuki looked up at me with eyes of suspicion, then she advised me:

"Let me inform you in advance, Nii-san, the your assigned homeroom consists of problem children entirely . I am not confident that they will listen to me so you will need to work hard on your own if you want them to accept you. Please bear this in mind."

Actually, I had already guessed for the most part—I was assigned to Brynhildr Class, the same as Mitsuki's.

Inside the small classroom, the desks were arranged in a 3x3 array.

Sweeping a glance at the girls in the seats, I understood very well what Mitsuki meant by problem children.

For some unknown reason, the blonde girl sitting in the front row was glaring angrily in my direction. Ignoring me while I was standing at the lectern, a

short-haired girl was reading her paperback book. In the second row, a red-haired girl was engrossed in playing on her laptop. A tomboy had her face turned away in displeasure.

Iris Freyja's seat was in the third row. She kept stealing glances towards me from time to time, but as soon as we made eye contact, she would turn her head away immediately.

The girls were all sitting on the edge seats, leaving the middle column unoccupied. How should I put it?

—Were they on bad terms with one another?

They felt rather divided.

"Well then, I shall make introductions anew. He is my older brother, Mononobe Yuu, sixteen years old. Since the Student No. is determined by order of enrollment, he is No. 8."

"Pleased to meet you."

Following Mitsuki's introduction, I lowered my head and bowed.

Clapping was heard. Only Iris was clapping but as soon as she saw that none of her classmates were applauding, she instantly went red in the face and lowered her head.

The blonde girl, who kept glaring at me the whole time, her gaze turned even sharper now and she stood up.

"I do not approve! To think you would search for a man to bring to Midgard... Mitsuki-san, is this not abuse of power?"

The blonde girl pointed to Mitsuki and accused.

"This decision was reached through official procedures and review. If you have any objections, feel free to start a petition. So long as you gather fifteen or more signatures, an extraordinary general assembly of the students can be called whereupon a referendum can be conducted. If a majority of the student population agrees with your motion, Lisa-san, then I shall reevaluate the matter."

"Guh..."

The girl named Lisa gnashed her teeth. She was probably thinking of the thunderous applause earlier. With a face of chagrin, she turned her gaze towards me.

She was evidently one of the students who would not listen to Mitsuki. Her reaction was precisely what I predicted beforehand.

Indeed, this was the normal response. In the first place, it would not be surprising if the majority of students held this stance.

Hence, I did not feel offended.

"Speaking of which... Are you truly a D? First and foremost, this is the one fact I cannot believe."

"Hmm... What you mean is you'd like to see proof?"

Lisa nodded affirmatively in response to my question.

"Indeed, please prove it right now. Everyone is interested, isn't that right?"

At Lisa's call, all the other girls looked up from what they were busy doing, gazing in my direction. Now I had no choice but to proceed with it.

"Mitsuki, may I?"

"Eh? Oh, you may... So long as it is simple transmutation. Since phenomena involving kinetic energy or the transmutation of unstable substances is very dangerous, it is forbidden outside of training sites."

I confirmed with Mitsuki, prompting her to nod uneasily.

Mitsuki should know better than anyone the fact that I am a D. Why was she making such a facial expression?

"Don't worry, I won't fail. Just watch."

I smiled at Mitsuki to reassure her, then started the demonstration.

Extending my hand, I concentrated to picture my hand reaching into the interior of the world.

Then with my fingertips immersed in an imaginary parallel world, I grabbed the "world in the Far Beyond" and drew it out.

A black sphere the size of a baseball instantly manifested on my palm.

A commotion instantly arose in the classroom.

This allusionary act was something I had repeated thousands, tens of thousands of times previously. I could not possibly fail.

—The black sphere was known as dark matter, an all-purpose element that could be converted into any material or phenomenon in this world. Although there were many theories regarding dark matter, it is believed that it is very likely a part of the "world in the Far Beyond."

The ability to produce dark matter could be regarded as proof of a D's identity.

As proof, it was enough... But ending it here would be too boring.

Hence, I decided to perform my most familiar transmutation.

Anti-personnel armament—AT Nergal.

Retrieving the *blueprint* stored in my mind and melding it into the dark matter, I caused its shape and properties to change.

Then I felt from my hand the familiar weight and hardness. A uniquely shaped gun created from the transmutation of dark matter. As though assembled from multiple blocks, the gun's body exhibited faintly glowing lines that seemed like a pattern carved upon it.

It looked like a model gun from some kind of science fiction movie, but this was undoubtedly a real combat weapon used by NIFL in recent years. Strictly speaking, the ones issued by NIFL were the mass production (MP) models rather than my archetype (AT).

According to habit, I entered a stance while holding up the gun, leaning my back against the wall.

"Oh..."

At this moment, I came back to my senses and put down the gun in embarrassment while I surveyed the crowd. For some reason, they were all stunned.

What was going on? Dark matter transmutation should be something everyone here could perform with ease.

"Is that a... gun? Rather than a mere alteration of dark matter's form... it appears more to be a fully materialized gun?"

Lisa asked me in a trembling voice.

"Yeah, that's completely correct."

"It doesn't shoot actual bullets, does it?"

"What are you talking about? What's the point of making a gun that can't shoot?"

Upon hearing my answer, everyone showed an unmistakable expression of shock on their face this time.

"I-Impossible! To craft something so intricate through imagination alone, that would be impossible for a human !"

After seeing Lisa's reaction, I finally realized I had done something unnecessary.

At NIFL, other people would only think "this is the way Ds are supposed to be like" without making a big deal out of things. But here, where everyone was a D, I would be compared to them according to the same standards.

Since what's done is done, it could not be helped. I forcibly glossed over the issue.

"Uh, I can't help it if you say it's impossible... I just did it in an actual demonstration."

"T-True, you do have a point..."

Left speechless, Lisa bowed her head.

At this moment, the tomboyish girl with the displeased demeanor earlier raised her hand.

"You're so amazing... I even jumped in fright. Did you practice this?"

"Well, more or less..."

Despite feeling guilty about it, I lied.

"Wow... That's really amazing... But why are you putting so much work into something that's wasting effort?"

"Wasting effort?"

I frowned and ask. I originally thought she was mocking me but the girl's eyes were very serious. She sincerely found it incomprehensible.

"Yeah, because a small gun like that won't work on dragons at all, right?"

This answer made me realize the fundamental difference between these girls and me. Namely, the guiding principles of our educations were completely different.

These girls were trained to fight dragons.

A gun's transmutation was completely pointless to them. They most likely had far more powerful means of attack than guns.

Hence, even if I managed to surprise them to some extent, I would never win their approval with this. It would not affect perceptions of me at Midgard.

—My demonstration was nothing more than a funny trick.

Looking down at the gun, I muttered to myself mentally.

What I had learned in my days at NIFL so far was mainly methods of fighting humans. Using military force to pacify countries and regions where public order had broken down due to the passage of dragons—This was NIFL's main activity.

NIFL's military power was directed at humans, not dragons.

In other words, that was as far as my level of power reached—

"Nii-san, I have to confiscate this."

While I was lost in thought, Mitsuki took away my gun from the side.

"Mitsuki?"

"This sort of dangerous object is forbidden in school. I will be responsible for it disposal. Please do not frivolously perform this type of transmutation ever again ."

After a harsh glare from her, I could only answer "... Understood" obediently.

The expression of uneasiness she showed in the beginning was perhaps from guessing this sort of development.

Mitsuki held the gun behind her back and swept her gaze across her classmates.

"I believe this is enough to prove that my brother is a D. Homeroom is almost over, so let us start simple self-introductions next. Excluding me, please introduce yourself according to Student No. sequence."

Saying that, Mitsuki looked at Lisa. Despite a defiant expression on her face, Lisa still stood up.

"Student No. 1, my name is Lisa Highwalker. Sixteen years of age. I still do not approve!"

Lisa pointed at me at Mitsuki then sat down angrily.

Next to stand up was the short-haired girl who had been engrossed in reading.

"I am Student No. 2, Firill Crest... Fifteen years old, my hobby is reading. Pleased to meet you."

The girl calling herself Firill bowed slightly then took her seat quietly.

Then the tomboyish girl stood up, the student who had called me out for "wasting effort."

"I'm Ariella Lu, fifteen years old, Student No. 5. If possible, I hope you won't drag us down. I hate weak people."

Ariella went with harsh words right off the bat, just as earlier. She seemed to be the straightforward and upfront type.

By the way... Why did the numbering suddenly jump to five?

Even if Mitsuki was skipped, that still meant one person was missing. However, no one corrected this in particular. The next student stood up.

This was the red-haired girl who had been using her computer the whole time. Once she stood up, I could see that she was especially petite.

"Mm."

The red-haired girl took out a small portable terminal to show me the screen. My vision was supposed to be quite good but I still needed to focus and stare to read it clearly. Leaning forward, I read out the displayed words:

"Student No. 6... Ren Miyazawa... Don't look down on me just because I'm young... I'm ten times smarter than you...?"

After I read it out, the young girl Ren nodded silently and sat down immediately.

By my side, Mitsuki whispered to me a supplementary explanation.

"The various homerooms essentially gather students of similar age, but since Ren-san is what you would call a prodigy, she skipped grades and was assigned to our class."

A girl who looked quite difficult to handle. I was gradually losing confidence in my ability to get along with these girls.

Then the last to stand up was Iris Freyja.

As though committing her resolve, she made eye contact with me. An unnatural smile surfaced on her face .

"Mononobe... Sorry I called you a molester and pervert yesterday and said embarrassing things—Uwah!?"

Iris suddenly bowed her head to apologize but crashed her head into a desk with a thud.

Seeing Iris suddenly apologize instead of introducing herself, the other classmates all looked at her in surprise.

"H-Hey, are you alright?"

"I-I'm alright... But that's not important, listen to me! Mononobe! I was wrong! Just as Mitsuki-chan said, it's not right to discriminate just because someone is a guy! As fellow Ds, we have to cherish one another!"

It looked like Mitsuki's speech had touched Iris' heart deeply. Should I call her naive or innocent...? It was not a bad thing, but it made one worry for her.

"So I don't mind what happened yesterday anymore! Whether getting seen naked, pinned to the ground, or almost robbed of the shirt I was wearing, I don't mind anymore!"

"Hey—"

After hearing what Iris aid, the classmates all gazed at me differently.

Icy cold gazes were stabbing into me. The classroom's temperature felt as though it had plunged ten degrees all of a sudden.

"N-No! That was—"

I was about to defend myself when Mitsuki patted me on the shoulder.

"Nii-san and Iris-san are apparently *extremely~* acquainted already. Let us end the introductions here. Everyone, I shall conduct a thorough investigation regarding the matter just now, so please do not spread rumors based on groundless speculation."

Smiling to the class while she spoke, Mitsuki gave off pressure that made even Lisa nod and agree reflexively.

At this moment, the bell rang, sounding like any other school's.

Then Iris and I were instantly taken away to the student counseling room where Mitsuki interrogated us.

Part 4

"Sigh... What rotten luck."

I groaned, sprawled on the desk.

Thanks to Iris testifying on my behalf, I was spared from weird misunderstandings, but the entire class all learned about the truth.

Seeing her naked body and pinning her under my body were true, hence the surrounding gazes remained icy cold. Although the level of coldness had improved somewhat, from a level directed towards a criminal to one directed towards a pervert, it still made me uncomfortable all over.

"Mononobe, are you okay?"

Iris peeked at me face and asked in worry.

"...Not too good, but I'll try my best to survive."

Ultimately, it was my fault so I could not blame her.

"Really? Please tell me if anything bothers you. I'll help no matter what! Oh... B-But... perverted things excluded. Because I really felt afraid when you pinned me to the ground, Mononobe."

"I get it, it was my bad that time. I won't do anything weird to you again. Besides, if I really did it... Things wouldn't have been settled so easily."

I secretly glanced at the seat on my right.

My seat was the middle one in the third row with Iris on my left and Mitsuki on my right. The two seats in front of me were empty.

Mitsuki seemed to have student council matters to attend to and was away as a result.

It was currently the lunch break. The three students in the classroom were Iris, the red-haired prodigy Ren and myself. Ren was engrossed in the computer while eating snacks.

I had taken care of lunch in the student counseling room—Mitsuki had bought me bread from the snack shop—but her lecturing continued even while I was eating, rendering the meal quite tasteless.

Due to the interrogation dragging on, I still had not attended a single lesson yet. This morning's lessons were elective liberal arts subjects and attendance was not compulsory, apparently. Real classes began in the afternoon with core courses teaching knowledge needed by Ds.

The warning bell rang. Students returned to the classroom one after another.

Lisa and Ariella threw me a cold glance. Firill took her seat while holding a different paperback from before.

FInally, Mitsuki entered the classroom and sat in my neighboring seat. My first lesson at this school was finally about to begin.

Just as I waited nervously, the classroom's door opened with a clack.

A woman in her twenties appeared. Her long hair was tied in a ponytail behind her head.

The woman stepped up to the lectern and her slender eyes instantly surveyed us.

"Rise."

At Mitsuki's command, everyone stood up together. I frantically stood up from my seat as well.

"Bow."

We sat down after bowing. The woman waited until she had everyone's eyes on her before she started to speak.

"So, let's begin the lesson. However, we have a fresh face in the class today, as well as the very first male student since the school's founding... At the same time, he is also Mononobe Mitsuki's older brother."

The woman at the lectern shot her gaze at me. I reflexively straightened my back. Those were a soldier's eyes.

"In any case, let me introduce myself. I am Shinomiya Haruka, this class' homeroom teacher and in charge of all courses related to Ds. Rank: Colonel. And Midgard's commander at the same time. Please bear that in mind."

"Affirmative, Colonel."

Seeing me salute out of habit, the woman—Shinomiya Haruka—smiled.

"Excellent response. As expected of one from NIFL, I suppose? However, please don't address me as Colonel in school but call me Shinomiya-sensei."

"Yes, Shinomiya-sensei."

"Excellent. Then allow me to verify your knowledge level first. As revision, I will call upon others to answer questions, so everyone else needs to pay attention too. Mononobe Yuu, do you know for what purpose does this Midgard exist?"

I answered this question with my basic knowledge.

"I heard that it started out as an isolation facility to house the captured Ds, those who have the ability to generate dark matter. However, due to the increase in the number of Ds, international society began to acknowledge their position. As a result, Midgard gained independence from NIFL to become a self-governing educational institute under Asgard."

The situation of the Ds had undergone drastic changes over the past twenty-five years.

There was an extremely high economic value in the ability to produce dark matter from nothing and transmuting it to any arbitrary substance. From what I heard, wars were even fought over the acquisition of Ds, back in the time before I was born.

Hence, the United Nations had decided to label the cause of wars, these Ds, as a type of dragon, to be regarded as a resource belonging to the entire world, managed by the international organization Asgard.

As Asgard's army, NIFL captured Ds from all over the world under the banner of protection, isolating them on a remote island named Midgard.

However, those Ds, originally children, grew up as time passed. They began to petition for their rights and humans, hence continuing to rule over them became difficult.

After that, a D was also born among the daughters of a wealthy and ancient royal family, hence this served as the trigger for Midgard to acquire the right to autonomy all at once.

"Yes, then what are Midgard's current activities?"

"Cultivating the Ds' powers in directions beneficial to society and educating them, devoting efforts towards the production of rare resources, as well as training them as trump cards to deploy in battles against dragons."

Ds had become essential to modern industries.

If Midgard's supply were to be lost, nearly exhausted resources would instantly jump in price, possibly causing a world war.

Furthermore, currently speaking, Ds were considered the only ones with the possibility of defeating dragons.

Merely treating them as resources in the past, the world now had to acknowledge Ds as a force to be reckoned with.

These facts were all part of common knowledge that could be learned in schools outside.

I did not think it was possible to be wrong... But Shinomiya-sensei differed.

"This answer is worth roughly forty marks. Midgard's most important responsibility lies elsewhere. It isn't publicized to the outside world, but this remodeled island is a stronghold for intercepting dragons. They will inevitably attack, sooner or later."

"Inevitably...?"

I frowned, unable to understand those words.

Seeing my reaction, Shinomiya-sensei's gaze turned.

"Lisa Highwalker, please recite the list of all confirmed dragons to date."

Suddenly called upon, Lisa stood up calmly to answer the question.

"Yes. A total of seven dragons have appeared to date. They are respectively: The black dragon—'Black' Vritra. The white dragon—'White' Leviathan. The red dragon—'Red' Basilisk. The blue dragon—'Blue' Hekatonkheir. The yellow dragon—'Yellow' Hraesvelgr. The green dragon—'Green' Yggdrasil. The purple dragon—'Purple' Kraken."

"Excellent, please take a seat. I will add one point to that. Vritra has gone missing after vanishing twenty-five years whereas Kraken was vanquished two years ago. In other words, there are currently five dragons roaming the world, doing as they please."

Shinomiya looked at me as though seeking confirmation. Because I had spent time in the army, I already knew things of this level. Seeing me nod in response, Shinomiya-sensei continued:

"Why did dragons awaken all over the world at the same time? And what purpose drives their actions? To the outside world, our official stance is that these answers are unknown. But in actual fact, we have already found a relatively believable theory. Namely, their goal is searching for a mate."

"A mate... huh?"

I tilted my head and asked. Shinomiya-sensei nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, the dragons are each looking for a suitable mate. You do know that birthmarks called dragon marks are found on Ds, right? When targeted by a dragon, a D's dragon mark would change in color, and once that D comes into contact with the dragon targeting her... She will turn into a dragon of the same type."

"No way... Ds will turn into dragons?"

I cried out in disbelief.

"This fact was confirmed during the battle against Kraken. Two years ago, we vanquished two Krakens."

No way... Meaning that they had killed one of their own who had turned into a dragon?

This left me unable to make even a sound. I was overcome with terror.

"After that, Midgard's function was changed fundamentally. For the purpose of killing male dragons that desire female dragons, Midgard has become a stronghold for interception. Students raise their combat power for self-defense in preparation for the attacks of dragons. And not only that, we are also planning to go on the offensive. Iris Freyja, which dragon are we currently planning to attack?"

Called upon, Iris shook then stood up frantically to answer.

"Y-Yes! I-It's the red dragon—'Red' Basilisk."

"Correct answer. Due to this reason, Mononobe Yuu, although it's very sudden, I must ask you to accept a test to simulate combat against Basilisk. The test will take place one week later while training is being held today in preparation. Everyone change to gym clothing and assemble at training site number three!"

"Affirmative!"

Everyone answered in unison apart from me, standing up from their seats. Still shocked from learning that Ds could turn into dragons, I was unable to respond.

While I was stunned on the spot, Mitsuki patted my shoulder.

"Please head to the unused classroom next door to get changed, Nii-san. Or perhaps, you intend to admire our naked bodies here? Just like how you watched Iris-san last time?"

Despite the smile on her face, her eyes were not smiling at all. Iris looked at me with her face all red.

"Mononobe... You're a pervert after all?"

"What do you mean, after all!? I-I'm leaving right now!
"

Picking up my bag which contained the gym clothes just delivered this morning, I frantically fled the classroom.

Training site number three was a facility deep underground on campus. It was a huge rectangular space over a 100m long. Whether the ceiling, the walls or the floor, everything was covered by steel-reinforced concrete, with equipment such as cameras and screens installed all over the place.

"We took the elevator to a very deep level, right...? Why build a training site so deep underground?"

Iris was next to me, doing warm-up exercises. Hearing my question, she looked in my direction.

"Because the environment might get contaminated depending on different transmuted matter, so it's necessary to have closed space underground. After all, whether poison gas or nuclear material, we can create anything as long as we have the intent."

Iris answered while doing stretching exercises.

I found my drifting gaze uncontrollably drawn to her wobbling bosom inside her white t-shirt and her thighs extending out of her bloomers. Wait, why are they still wearing bloomers in this day and age? Maybe because

they did not need to worry about male gazes originally, they prioritized ease of movement... But still, it gave me difficulty in directing my gaze.

"Poison gas and nuclear material... You girls are planning to make such dangerous things next?"

"Of course not, this is just in case. If poison gas or a nuclear bomb got made, we won't be spared either. But transmutations sometimes fail and it's possible that those things might get made by accident, right?"

"I see, transmutation failure..."

I eyed Iris suspiciously.

"W-What, Mononobe?"

"No, I was just thinking, you're probably the most dangerous, Iris. Judging from your self-detonation blunder yesterday, you're not very good at controlling transmutation, right?"

"Ugh... N-Nothing of that sort! I will definitely succeed today!"

"In other words, you've never succeeded before?"

"Uh..."

Iris pouted and glared at me. She was probably trying to look angry but she looked very cute instead. I could not help but smile wryly.

"W-What are you laughing at!? Sheesh, stop saying such malicious things. Come over and help me with warm-up exercises. Relaxing the body is very important for controlling our powers."

"Eh? Why me—"

"Because warm-ups are meant to be done in pairs, right? Mitsuki-chan normally pairs up with me, but she's talking to the teacher and looks very busy."

Indeed, Mitsuki was talking to Shinomiya-sensei in the corner the whole time. Everyone else was paired up to do stretching exercises. Lisa was with Firill while Ariella was paired with Ren.

"Well, I don't really mind... But are you seriously okay with it, Iris?"

"Why are you asking? You're helping me if you'll pair up with me. Okay okay, Mononobe, I'm going to do hamstring stretching, so help push my back."

Since Iris did not mind, it was fine, I guess? I pressed my hand on her soft back. Seeing her lovely neck in the gaps of her silver hair, I could not help but feel my heart rate rise.

"Then I'm gonna push."

"Okay... Ah, ow ow ow!"

Without even reaching her toes with her fingers, Iris was already screaming.

"You're way too stiff."

"N-No, Mononobe, you're the one doing it wrong. You're pushing too hard!"

"Then let's do it slowly this time."

"Ah... Ow... Ah, mmm... E-Enough!"

Again, Iris gave up without reaching her toes.

"See, you're too stiff like I said."

"Ugugu... H-How about we switch! This time, I'll be the one to make you cry out, Mononobe!"

"Fine fine, be my guest."

As she pushed forcefully, I allowed my body to bend down. This sort of stretching exercise was something I did many times before going to bed each night, so it was no problem at all.

"Ehhh!? Why? I-In that case, try this!!"

Seeing me so relaxed, Iris put her entire body weight on me. With her body tightly pressed against me, I could feel a soft sensation transmitted through the gym clothes.

"I-Iris, hold on! This is bad!"

"Oh, you're finally hurting? Hmph, but it's not over yet , I'm gonna make you taste the same pain I felt. Prepare yourself. Take that! Take that!"

Her highly elastic bosom was pressed on my back. At this rate, my male organ was going to react. If others were to witness that, my classmates' perception of me would probably deteriorate to an unsalvageable degree.

"S-Stop it now—"

"Nii-san, you seem to be quite happy."

The voice entering my ears caused the blood rising in a certain body part to subside.

I looked up in trepidation, only to see Mitsuki with arms akimbo, staring down at me.

"Training is about to begin. Please finish your exercises and line up. I suppose that must sadden you, Nii-san..."

"N-Nothing like that. I'm not saddened at all! You actually helped me out big time, Mitsuki!"

I left Iris and stood up to thank her, but Mitsuki blinked in surprise.

"I had no intention of helping you. Whatever, we should hurry."

For some reason, the hint of a smile surfaced on the corners of Mitsuki's lips while she pulled my hand and walked.

"Oh, wait up, Mononobe! Mitsuki-chan!"

As we started assembling at Shinomiya-sensei's side, Iris hastily ran after us.

Part 5

"Next week's test will involve attacking a block of diamond placed at a range of 100m. You will be mainly assessed on accuracy and destructive power. The main objective is to test whether you are capable of causing damage to Basilisk, because its body is covered by slightly red-tinted scales of diamond."

After we lined up properly, Shinomiya-sensei explained the training.

In the direction indicated by Shinomiya-sensei, a block of diamond with a diameter of ten meters was placed there. Most likely, Mitsuki had made it using transmutation while we were doing warm-up exercises. How terrifying, a D's power—I felt impressed from the bottom of my heart as though it did not apply to me.

"This test requires carrying out unstable transmutation under high-energy conditions, hence the risk of failure is very high. Hence, to accommodate students whose forte

is not transmutation control, I have also prepared an auxiliary test. This test assumes that you will work as part of the defense team in the battle against Basilisk. You must create a giant protective barrier at a distance of 50m, as large as you can. Apart from size, thickness and hardness of your shield, you will also be assessed on transmutation speed. Please bear that in mind, everyone. "

Despite saying "everyone," Shinomiya-sensei had her gaze directed towards Iris and me.

A newcomer like me and Iris, a student not good at transmutation, should choose this test, right?

"I hope you will pass at least one of the two tests. If anyone fails both, they will not be able to take part in combat operations against Basilisk."

"Eh..."

I was the only one next to Iris currently and noticed her exclaiming in alarm.

She was gnashing her teeth with an extremely serious look on her face. I could not feel any of her earlier levity.

"So we will start one by one. Volunteers, present yourself."

"Yes!"

Iris was the first to raise her hand

Everyone showed a worried look. Apparently, the whole class knew how bad Iris' transmutation control was.

"How worrying. Nothing good ever happens when the last-ranked Iris-san gets all fired up."

I could hear Lisa whispering to Firill.

"Very well, Iris Freyja, I would advise you to take the auxiliary test. Do you agree?"

"I don't mind doing the auxiliary test, but in that case, I'm going to use mithril to make a shield!"

Mithril huh... Indeed, it would be full marks if one could use that to make a shield.

Mithril was the toughest alloy in theory, only possible to create through the transmutation of dark matter. New

technology and weapons developed in recent years were mostly based on the mithril provided by the Ds. I had seen many weapons like that at NIFL.

"Oh, I look forward to it. Please begin. Everyone, step back to the wall."

We followed Shinomiya-sensei's instruction and left Iris. The emergency shelter's entrance was nearby so evacuation could take place any time if anything happened.

"Yes! I will do my best!!"

Iris clenched her fist and nodded, then moved over to a marked location. A marker with the same color was also present at a spot 50m away. Looking from here, 50m felt like quite a far distance. Simply getting a grasp on the sense of distance would be hard enough already, but in addition to that, the required transmuted substance was even mithril.

Mithril's transmutation difficulty was quite high. Due to it being an alloy, it required transmuting multiple metals in fixed proportions, which necessitated quite precise control.

"I will make.... I will definitely succeed in transmuting. .."

Iris was so nervous that her entire body was tense. The way she looked, she would fail even if she were originally capable of the task.

"Iris! You said yourself that relaxing is important, right ? Relax yourself more!"

I yelled at her because I could not bear the sight. Iris turned towards me.

"I-I know without needing you to tell me that, Mononobe! But still... thank you."

Iris smiled with a gentle look on her face. Then taking a deep breath, she extended her arms forward.

"Caduceus!"

Like the first time we met, Iris materialized a silver-white staff. The staff's outline fluctuated unstably, giving off bright light.

"Mitsuki, why does Iris need to summon a staff?"

This test was clearly to create a shield—Perplexed, I asked as a result.

"Huh...? Nii-san, you do not know about fictional armaments?"

"Fictional armaments?"

I was hearing this term for the first time. Seeing my reaction, Mitsuki sighed.

"...Speaking of which, Nii-san, you transmuted dark matter directly into a gun last time. However, that method is unorthodox to begin with."

"Unorthodox... Why?"

"When transmuting dark matter suddenly, it is easy to produce unexpected matter due to the uncertainty in mental image, which is why one should first maintain the dark matter in the shape of a weapon like her, then filtering out the direction of transmutation."

Mitsuki pointed at Iris who was holding the staff in full concentration.

"Maintaining dark matter in the shape of a weapon... Meaning that the staff hasn't materialized?"

"Indeed. Although altering the form causes the surface to materialize slightly, that staff is still 99% composed of dark matter."

"No wonder I feel that the outline is unstable. But by changing the appearance to a weapon's shape, does it really make things easier to imagine...?"

Because I have always transmuted dark matter directly , it was impossible to understand that feeling without experiencing it.

"Yes, this is quite an effective method. A sword slices, a spear pierces, a bow shoots. When performing transmutation while picturing the respective weapon being used, that type of weapon will automatically attack ."

"I see, then it eliminates the need to imagine the resulting scene when attacking. But how does a staff attack? It feels like it can only be used to smack things at most, right?"

I could not think of other ways of using, so I asked. Mitsuki smiled, the corners of her lips rising slightly.

"You are too lacking in imagination, Nii-san. Speaking of staves, of course one would associate them with magic ."

"Magic...?"

Although I suspected her of joking, Mitsuki continued to speak with a serious face:

"There are certain students who specialize in this method, imagining magic to perform transmutation. Unlike you, Nii-san, girls have very rich imaginations."

"Really...?"

"Really."

I did not quite agree and turned my gaze back to Iris. Imagining something so intangible like magic was definitely beyond me, but to Iris, perhaps that was the method she was best at.

Maybe building the picture in her mind, Iris did not move for a while.

"So Mitsuki, what does this name of Caduceus mean?"

"I remember it was the staff carried by the god Hermes ."

"Oh... So even Iris would choose such a flashy name?"

"When altering the shape of dark matter, it is advisable to imitate mythical weapons and tools because transmutation might sometimes occur directly and subconsciously if objects that actually existed were used for reference."

"So that's why you need something fictional? I get it now, it's not Iris trying to act cool."

I listened intently and heard her murmuring quietly. Since Iris was imagining magic to perform transmutation , perhaps this would be an incantation. Just as a sword needed a swinging motion, a staff would need a corresponding action.

"Come, come, fragments of the Far Beyond..."

Iris raised her staff and recited, instantly producing numerous small black spheres near the marker—Dark matter. She looked like she was going to perform transmutation directly at the 50m location.

"That's amazing..."

I honestly felt impressed. Without high-level spatial awareness, this would not be possible.

If I were doing it, I would probably generate dark matter in the wrong place because I failed to grasp the distance accurately. Although I revised my opinion on Iris, if she actually succeeded this time, it would raise the question why she caused an explosion under her own feet the first time we met.

"O holy silver, transform!"

The dark matter created by Iris gathered to one point and started to transmute.

The dark matter twisted in shape, gradually turning silver in color, but—

Pish!

An ominous sound echoed throughout the entire training site.

In the next instant, the manifesting mithril glowed brightly then exploded.

The training site shook.

"Kya—"

Iris was blown into the air by the blast.

"Iris!"

I reflexively rushed forward. Although the intense wind opposed me, I lowered my posture and broke through the strong wind.

Let me make it!

Sliding like a baserunner, I inserted myself between Iris and the concrete floor.

"Guha!?"

Unable to catch her precisely, all I could manage was serve as her meat cushion to soften the impact.

Iris' head struck me hard in the chest, making me cough nonstop for a moment.

"Cough, cough... H-Hey Iris, are you okay?"

"Ooh..."

I called her name but Iris simply whimpered then fainted immediately—

Chapter 2 - Witch of Silver Explosions

Part 1

Seeing the white room, I was reminded of my first encounter with *him*.

Yes, it was three years ago.

After I surrendered myself as a D, I was injected with some kind of drug and fell unconscious. By the time I woke up, I was in a cramped room.

The ceiling, floor and walls were all pure white. Standing in front of me was a young man in military uniform.

—Who is he? Someone I know? Or someone I just met?

I had no idea no matter how hard I thought. With one exception, everything seemed so fuzzy and unclear.

Staring at me, the man then spoke:

"...Although the cause is unknown, you happen to be broken just right. That plus your rare talent makes me like you very much."

The man's voice was very loud, strong and forceful as though he did not permit anyone to miss his words.

"How about it? Do you want to work under me? It's very meaningful work. You'll be able to save hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of people. You are definitely very suited to the job."

I was unable to answer despite being asked a question.

Because I was gagged. My arms and legs were tied up too.

Looking at me, the man smiled and extended his hand towards me. I thought he was going to take out the object stuffed in my mouth—But the man ended up grabbing me by the hair.

Forcing my head down with a push, he compelled me to nod.

"Really? So you agree? Thank you. From today onwards, you are my subordinate."

The man smiled while he spoke.

An indescribable chill instantly ran along my spine. This was not a conversation, it was merely a formality.

Only then did I finally realize that my fate had already been decided.

Coming from this man's mouth was my future, my destiny ahead.

"You'll definitely achieve it. You'll definitely become a killer who can save thousands, billions—"

Part 2

"Eh, where is this place?"

"Sigh... You finally woke up. It's already after school. This is the infirmary, Iris. I brought you here after you fainted."

Iris blinked and stared at the white ceiling while I explained to her.

After the explosion from the failed transmutation of mithril, Shinomiya-sensei instantly contacted the administration. A woman calling herself the school nurse soon arrived.

Although the nurse said Iris was fine without significant injury, she was still sent to rest in the infirmary just to be on the safe side. I stayed behind voluntarily to look after her.

Later on, that nurse had to go out to attend to certain matters, thus leaving Iris and me alone at the moment.

"Mononobe...? Ahhh... I messed up again, right?"

She seemed to be linking up her memories. With a gloomy expression, Iris murmured.

"Yeah, the explosion blew you away completely. A big failure that couldn't be more simple and obvious."

"You're so blunt... Shouldn't you encourage and console me at a time like this?"

Iris said with a wry smile.

"Half-assed encouragement to give you baseless hope would only make you repeat the same failure—or it could even make things worse. People who can't confront their failures tend to die early—That's what I learned at NIFL."

"Confront failures..."

"Yeah, Iris, besides, you were probably thinking you'd succeed as long as you tried hard, right?"

"H-How did you know!?"

Iris made a look surprise.

"I could tell from the way you looked before the training."

"A-Am I a big failure?"

"Yeah, you were a big failure today, Iris."

I nodded in agreement. Iris slumped her shoulders and asked again in a small voice:

"An idiot, airheaded and useless?"

"Currently speaking, perhaps there's no way you can deny these kinds of criticisms."

"Really...? Then I guess it's impossible for me to join the Counter-Dragon Squad..."

Iris sighed heavily.

"You want to join the Counter-Dragon Squad, Iris? But that's the most dangerous job, putting yourself on the frontlines, you know?"

"Yes... Because that's my reason for coming to Midgard ."

Iris nodded to confirm then spoke as though looking out into the distance:

"I... until a year ago, I've always lived an ordinary life in the outside world. But when I was on a ship with my family, the white dragon—'White' Leviathan—happened to pass nearby... Causing our ship to sink."

"A dragon disaster huh..."

I muttered angrily. Disasters caused simply from the movement of dragons were called dragon disasters. Three years ago, Mitsuki and I had similarly encountered a dragon disaster caused by "Blue" Hekatonkheir.

"That's right... Because of the dragon disaster, everyone died. My powers awakened for the first time then... I was the sole survivor."

The smile surfaced on Iris' face did not carry her usual cheerfulness. Instead, it contained an element of self-deprecation.

"Because no one saw me use my powers at the time, I could have kept quiet and continued living outside... But I admitted my identity as a D on my own."

"...You intend to take revenge against the dragons?"

"How should I say this...? Actually, I don't have any negative obsession like hatred in my heart... But I think I must step forward to fight. It's for this reason that I survived."

Looking at me, Iris' eyes shone with strong determination.

Seeing those unwavering eyes, I could not help but gasp. Back in the past when Mitsuki declared she would protect the town, she had shown the same eyes too.

"...That means you still don't intend to give up, right?"

"Huh?"

"Although you just said that joining the Counter-Dragon Squad is impossible, you don't intend to give up on the test, right?"

"T-That goes without saying! Even though I might still fail... I will try my hardest!"

Hearing the expected answer, I smiled.

"Like I said, just working hard isn't enough. You've got to avoid repeating the same mistakes."

"Urgh... I understand this logic, but even if I understand, I still can't do it..."

Seeing Iris disheartened, I made a decision in my heart .

"Iris, how many training sessions are there before the test?"

"Uh, I think there won't be any more chances to use training site number three... We'll just have basic training in smaller spaces from now on."

"Hmm... That's not good. We're out of options if there's no time to practice. Is self-directed practice after school allowed here?"

"Using training sites requires authorization and someone to supervise."

"Oh okay, anyway, I'll discuss with Mitsuki first. If authorization is granted, let's start training together after school starting tomorrow."

"Eh... Training together?"

Iris' mouth gaped wide in surprise.

"Yeah, today's training was forcibly interrupted. I'm a total novice in the area of fighting dragons, so I have to learn Midgard's combat methods as quickly as possible."

"Mononobe..."

Tears welled up in Iris' eyes.

"H-Hey! Why are you crying?"

"I-I dunno..."

Seeing her tears flowing nonstop, I hurried to comfort her.

But Iris simply would not stop crying for a long time...

Part 3

"Training after school... Is that so?"

Due to accompanying Iris the whole time until her emotions stabilized, I returned late. As soon as I got back to the dormitory, I went directly to the dining hall to pitch the afterschool training idea to Mitsuki.

It was just after 7pm. Arranged on the dining table were dishes prepared by the housework robots, but they looked untouched. Mitsuki had probably been waiting all along for my return.

"Yeah, I heard that we could practice as long as we obtained authorization."

"Indeed, such a rule exists... In any case, we should start the meal first and you can tell me about it. The food is getting cold."

Mitsuki pointed at the dinner laid out on the table.

"You're right. Sorry for making you wait. Let's begin."

"Yes, bon appetit."

Mitsuki clapped her hands together then picked up her chopsticks. While picking up food with chopsticks, I continued to converse.

"We need time to train. Iris' state is obvious from today while I don't know anything because I just transferred. At this rate, it doesn't take a genius to predict next week's test results. We won't pass."

"That is true indeed..."

For some reason, Mitsuki was reacting a bit sluggishly. Sticking her chopsticks in the roasted saury, she was half-heartedly engaged in the conversation.

Tonight's cuisine was pure Japanese style. The table was laden with my favorite dishes. If anything, Mitsuki's preference lay in western food, so she must have prepared this for me.

"So I guess we have to discuss directly with Shinomiya-sensei?"

"No, my position is sufficient to grant authorization. No need to trouble Shinomiya-sensei, but... Nii-san, why are you trying so proactively to help Iris-san?"

Mitsuki asked in a slightly sulking tone of voice.

"Do I look like I'm favoring Iris that much?"

"Yes, quite."

Mitsuki gazed at me with narrowed eyes. Her response came with no hesitation at all.

"If that's the case... I guess it's because Iris has been trying as hard as she can."

"Trying as hard as she can?"

"Yeah, someone who tries as hard as they can... It somehow feels impossible to ignore people like that."

Just like Mitsuki three years ago—

I added these words silently in my mind while smiling at Mitsuki.

"Hmm... N-Nii-san, you are too nice, but... It is commendable that you are not doing this for ulterior motives. No helping it, then I shall take on the role of supervisor—"

In the middle of Mitsuki's sentence, an alarm suddenly sounded in the surroundings.

"W-What?"

I looked out the dining hall window in surprise, only to see the academy clock tower at the island's center, flashing a red warning light.

'Emergency warning, emergency warning—Level E alert, Type Yellow. I repeat, Level E alert, Type Yellow!'

The urgent voice was coming from speakers inside the dormitory but Mitsuki did not get up from her seat. Instead, she continued her meal gracefully.

"Mitsuki, is it time to be eating leisurely now? There's an alert!"

"Yes, but the alert mentioned Type Yellow, which ought to be 'Yellow' Hraesvelgr approaching this island."

"What are you talking about!?"

"But seeing as it is Level E, that means Hraesvelgr simply brushed past the warning zone, that is all. Since Hraesvelgr flies at high-speed in the stratosphere, this type of approach happens roughly once or twice a month . Relax, it will end very soon."

No sooner had Mitsuki finished than the alert sound stopped. The red warning light also shut off.

'Target has left the warning zone. All units, please return to regular stations.'

This time, the announcer's voice was calm. I breathed a sigh of relief and returned to eat at the dining table.

"Gave me quite a fright... I thought a dragon was going to attack. It's because I heard during the daytime that dragons target this place."

"Dragons start their advance after the dragon mark of one of the Ds changes color. Currently, I have yet to receive reports of that sort."

After finishing this sentence, Mitsuki drank her miso soup and ended the meal.

I hastily shoved the rest of the food into my mouth.

"—What a wonderful meal."

"Fanksh fo' da food..."

With food in my mouth, I mumbled a response to Mitsuki.

"This is very impolite, Nii-san. Neglecting etiquette will worsen others' impressions of you, so please pay attention. Come, do over."

"—Thanks for the food."

"Pass. So, Nii-san, I shall make a trip to the school. Although nothing happened, there are aftermath matters to handle. I will take this opportunity to complete the procedure for training site usage."

"Thank you, Mitsuki!"

I stood up to thank her.

"This is not something worth thanking me for. As the student body president, it is only natural to assist students who are striving to improve."

"Even if that's the case, I'm still grateful to you."

I thanked again. Mitsuki avoided eye contact.

"I-I was interrupted just now. I am supervising to prevent you from engaging in any behavior with Iris-san that goes against public morals, Nii-san. I will watch you two carefully."

"What are you talking about? We're just training."

"Who knows if that is really the case... From what I saw, today's warm-up exercises were very suspicious already."

Mitsuki glared coldly at me.

"Ugh... Don't worry, I'll be careful. I won't let that kind of thing happen again."

"Please, Nii-san. Since this is a fundamental matter but too delicate for me to bring up in front of other girls... Do

know that inappropriate interaction between genders is strictly forbidden! Rather than a matter of public morals, it stems from more serious losses."

"Losses?"

"You know this, right? We Ds lose the power to create dark matter once we reach twenty years old or so—or become pregnant."

Mitsuki spoke, her cheeks reddening slightly.

"I've heard that kind of rumor before... Then it's true?"

I was surprised. Essentially, only Midgard held correct information regarding Ds. Many of the rumors circulating in the world were completely fabricated. I originally thought the pregnancy rumor was one of them .

"What...? So that is your level of knowledge? How fortunate that I decided to remind you beforehand as a precaution... If you were to take away someone's powers, Nii-san, you would probably be handed over to a tribunal meeting and sentenced to harsh punishment. Please, you must... you must pay attention."

Mitsuki glared at me harshly from extremely up close, warning me again and again.

Confronted with such pressure, I had not choice but to nod in response.

Part 4

Second day of my school life...

Because I was woken up by Mitsuki at 7am yesterday, I set my alarm clock for 6:30am today. Roused from bed by the noisy alarm, I washed my face and changed into uniform, then made my way to the dining hall.

"Good morning, Nii-san."

Greeting me, Mitsuki was sitting in the same seat as last night.

"Good morning..."

This feeling of family members greeting each other good morning felt quite unbelievable.

Rather than nostalgic, it felt quite new instead. That was the extent that my memories had been eroded.

After finishing the simple breakfast of only toast and salad, I picked up my school bag and exited the dormitory. Inside the bag were the portable terminal and gym clothing issued to me by the school. All the materials required for class were stored in the portable terminal, eliminating the need for textbooks.

The two of us walked on the road along the shore.

Like the first day, as soon as we went left the house, Mitsuki virtually stopped talking, hence we were essentially silent the whole time.

But incredibly, there was no feeling of awkwardness.

Looking out at sea, I could see cumulonimbus clouds rising from the horizon.

It was currently sunny but there might be showers later today.

The road took us away from the shore and as we gradually neared the center of the island, girls from other dorms began joining us on their way to school. Although hair colors and complexions varied widely, the majority of students were Asian girls.

It was said that the occurrence of Ds tended to increase the closer a location was to places where Vritra had passed through. Hence, Japan, where Vritra had first appeared, was where the greatest number of Ds had been born. It was also for this reason that Japanese was used as the lingua franca at Midgard.

"Good morning, Mitsuki-sama!"

"You're beautiful as usual today, Mitsuki-sama!"

"Your speech yesterday was so touching, Mitsuki-sama !"

Many students were greeting Mitsuki with excitement in their eyes.

"Good morning, everyone."

Mitsuki responded to them with a smile. Although I had already sensed it yesterday, Mitsuki really was quite a popular student body president.

The girls kept stealing glances at me while I walked with Mitsuki, but they hesitated and dared not talk to me . I guess it was difficult for them to relax and approach because of my male gender, but—

"Good morning to you too, Y-Yuu-sama!"

After greeting Mitsuki, one of the girls also spoke to me. It was a glasses-wearing girl who looked serious in personality.

"Oh, good morning."

Hearing my slightly nervous answer, the girl instantly fled with her face red. As soon as she met up with her friends in the distance, I could hear cries of joy along the lines of: "Kyah! I said it! I said it out loud!" "Well done, Mayumi!" "How does it feel up close!?"

Although it felt like being treated as an exotic animal, I did not feel particularly displeased.

"Nii-san, you are making a lewd expression. You wouldn't have forgotten my advice last night, have you?"

Mitsuki quietly reminded me as though reading my mind.

"I-I remember, it's just that I felt a bit happy that someone greeted me for the first time."

Inappropriate interactions between genders were forbidden. I knew that very well. But having lived in a world far from girls for so long, I simply got a little carried away from someone speaking to me. This was understandable, right?

The school's entrance resembled an automatic ticketing turnstile. I placed my student ID on the panel sensor and entered.

"Can I ask a question, Mitsuki?"

I asked her while we made our way to the classroom.

"Please go ahead, Nii-san. I can answer anything as long as it is not inane or top secret."

"...Just checking something about school life. You mentioned when you handed this student ID to me that it can be used for shopping. What's the limit?"

"Naturally, it depends on the funds in your own bank account. One difference between Midgard and most schools is that students receive a salary. Apart from minimum living expenses, students are rewarded according to their accomplishments when taking on

matter creation requests or NIFL missions. All of this is deposited into personal bank accounts."

Mitsuki took out her own student ID to show me while explaining fluently.

"Learning how to transmute rare metals and energy resources is a shortcut to making money, because requests of that sort are always more numerous than can be handled. But in your case, Nii-san, I doubt there is any urgency for you to earn money that desperately. Your bank account balance can be viewed from your portable terminal. Please have a look, Nii-san."

"Oh, I'll check it out."

I took out my portable terminal from my bag and tried to check my account information.

However, the figure shown there was far bigger than I imagined.

"Eh... Is there a mistake in the number of zeroes?"

I could not help but ask Mitsuki.

"No, the figure is correct. It includes your living expenses for this month as well as your wages from the three years working at NIFL. In consideration of the hardship you went through, Nii-san, it is actually on the low side."

Mitsuki clenched her fist as though squeezing out these words took much difficulty.

Judging from the side of her face, she seemed to be desperately enduring something.

How much did Mitsuki know exactly about my three years there?

As much as I felt concerned by this question, I was unable to ask her.

Because I was afraid of the answer.

Like that, we walked in silence and reached Brynhildr Class. I was greeted by a gaze completely unlike those along the way to school.

Because the blonde girl—Lisa—suddenly glared at me.

"G-Good morning."

I tried to greet her but she went "hmph" and turned her head away.

"...Good morning."

"Hmph."

I tried again but she turned her head even farther.

"Good morning."

The third try.

"Hm—Guh..."

Lisa tried to turn her head away for the third time but suddenly choked. She had apparently forgotten that there was a limit to her neck's rotation angle.

"A-Are you trying to kill me!?"

Lisa held her neck and complained.

"No, I just wanted to greet you."

"So irritating! You ought to show consideration for my neck! No matter how many times you repeat this, I shan't greet you!"

"Why?"

Hearing my question, Lisa glared harshly at me.

"Because I still have not approved the matter of your staying at Midgard."

"...I see, then there's nothing I can do about that. Thanks."

Hearing my word of thanks, Lisa looked surprised.

"Why are you thanking me?"

'Huh? Because even though you didn't greet me, you still answered my question."

"What...? H-How dare you mock me!?"

Lisa gnashed her teeth in chagrin.

"No, it's not as extreme as mocking, right..."

"I absolutely refuse to forgive you! Remember that, Mononobe Yuu! Hmph!"

Lisa extended her finger, pointing at me, then turned her head away again.

Continuing the conversation seemed difficult, so I went over to my seat. I will try my hardest. One day, she will approve of me.

I took out my portable terminal from my bag to get ready for class. At this moment, the classroom's door opened lightly and Iris poked her head in, looking extra apprehensive than usual.

Shifting her gaze, Iris seemed to be looking for someone. When she made eye contact with me she instantly made a panicking look.

"Oh! Mononobe, g-good morning!"

For some reason, Iris' voice sounded very frantic as she greeted me. What was with her apprehensive look just now? Then I saw her coming over to me in a panic.

Perhaps she was concerned about crying yesterday but I was not so tactless as to confirm that with her.

I decided to ignore the unnecessary and responded to her greeting as though nothing had happened.

"Good morning, Iris. I've obtained authorization so we can start our special training today."

Hearing me say that, Iris blushed and nodded.

"Great! We'll do our best, Mononobe!"

Classes in the morning were no different from an ordinary school's.

Mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry taught at the level of first year high school. These were core subjects because some of the knowledge could be applied towards matter creation.

The afternoon consisted of Shinomiya-sensei teaching about subjects related to Ds, but instead of practicals, it was carried out in lecture format.

"—To accommodate our new student, we will review during the lesson. Let us begin from the theory of transmutation techniques, Firill Crest. What type of transmutation has the widest range of applications?"

Called upon, Firill stood up and replied.

"...Air. By adjusting directionality and compression ratio, air can be used for defense and movement in addition to attack."

"Excellent. The transmutation of air is accompanied by the generation of wind. With appropriate adjustments, one could even fly in the sky. For those in the vanguard, this method of flying is virtually a required method of movement—"

The teacher was talking about systematized dark matter transmutation techniques and ways to use our powers in hypothetical battles against dragons. This knowledge felt very refreshing and new to me.

"—Furthermore, there are many substances that can only be created through the transmutation of dark matter , of which mithril and antimatter are particularly useful in battle. Mithril is theoretically the toughest alloy while

antimatter can be used to destroy any type of matter in an annihilation reaction. Very well, Ariella Lu, between these two substances, ultimate offense and the ultimate defense, which is stronger?"

Called upon, Ariella answered concisely:

"Antimatter."

"Indeed. This type of situation is where offense is stronger because if antimatter is used to attack, even mithril cannot withstand it. However, there is currently only one person in the Counter-Dragon Squad who is capable of transmuting antimatter—"

In consideration of my circumstances, Shinomiya-sensei was reviewing the basics while conducting her lesson to let me understand simple key points.

Using the creation of air to fly. Powerful long range attacks.

These two were apparently the most highly prized abilities in anti-dragon combat.

In other words, next week's test involved assessing one of them: testing students' skill in long range attacks. Because the target was diamond, simply hitting it was not enough. At the same time, attacks needed firepower that would not weaken after being shot from afar.

As relief measures, the auxiliary test also involved a high-difficulty skill. If it was just making a shield, ordinary transmutation was enough, but it was a totally different matter to manifest it at a distance of 50m.

Parameters were too different from combat against humans.

By this point, I finally became painfully aware that this was training for the sake of defeating *dragons*.

Next, after school, accompanied by Mitsuki, I went to the training site with totally tensed nerves.

Despite it being practice, Iris seemed to be nervous again.

Perhaps other homerooms had been training, a block of diamond was still located 100m out front.

"You are allowed to use this training site from 5 to 6: 30pm. I have obtained authorization for today, the day after tomorrow, as well as the day before the test. A total of three days. The other days were either booked or did not fit in my schedule. For that, I am deeply apologetic."

Mitsuki bowed her head to apologize to us.

"Ehhhh!? Three days is enough for practice! Sorry, Mitsuki-chan, you're accompanying us even though you're so busy. I'm so grateful to you!"

Iris held Mitsuki's hands and thanked her with a radiant smile.

"—No, responding to the requests of students is part of the student body president's responsibilities."

Mitsuki struggled free uncomfortably and separated from Iris.

"Even so, I still thank you!"

"No need for thanks. Hurry and begin to train. Time is limited, yes?"

"R-Right! So... Then you start first, Mononobe. You didn't get to take part in the training yesterday because you were taking me to the infirmary."

"—Got it."

I nodded and stood at the marked position. Anyway, I tried using my *past methods* to see how far they could go, then decide on the next step based on that.

First was the construction of a barrier. As a newcomer and novice, accepting the auxiliary test would be the more appropriate choice.

Standing at the prescribed location, I created a baseball's volume of dark matter.

This black mass was not any kind of matter or phenomenon yet. According to physical definitions, it did not even count as existing.

Nevertheless, it was definitely on my palm.

Only Ds were capable of sensing their existence.

But not ordinary humans. Hence, scholars proposed a hypothesis.

Namely, the dark matter conjecture.

For example, humans were able to photograph an object from different angles using a camera. They were able to capture a three dimensional object into an arbitrary two dimensional planar photograph.

Similarly, this black substance could be transmuted into any arbitrary substance from the three dimensional world.

Hence, it was believed that this could be a higher dimensional substance—ergo, it was named dark matter.

Supposing dark matter was a fourth dimensional substance, then defining its existence would require four axes.

What would the fourth axis be? It was still currently unknown, but the most convincing suggestion was that it was something closely related to the mind.

Because dark matter's form would change according to the creator's will.

Despite having no mass, the dark matter on my hand produced a sensation.

Probably, Ds used their minds to sense dark matter.

Hence, just by adding force of willpower to the body's movements, a throw towards a location 50m away was possible!

"Y-You threw it!?"

Iris exclaimed in surprise but I ignored her. My gaze followed the black sphere closely.

I did not have the ability to generate dark matter suddenly at the far distance of 50m. Hence, I threw it then judged the distance visually. This was the best method I could currently think of.

...Slight deviation to the right.

When the sphere arrived above the marker, I transmuted the dark matter.

Voicing silently in my mind, I imposed limits on the possibilities of the dark matter that could turn into anything.

The image formed in my mind was a shield of iron. Acquiring mass, the dark matter fell almost vertically with a clang, planted on the ground.

If it were still dark matter, it would not make any sound, vanishing as soon as it touched mass. Hence, the sound of impact was evidence of transmutation.

Although it had fallen to the right of the marker, standing upright there was exactly the shield I had imagined.

However, it was only two meters in length, which was fine when fighting humans, but somewhat worrying against dragons.

Also, it was lacking in thickness. Rather than a shield of iron, it would be more apt to call it a plate of iron.

"..."

Mitsuki silently went to verify my shield. Because it was some distance away, I had nothing to do for the moment, so I turned to face Iris.

"Mononobe, that was way too..."

Iris was looking at me in exasperation.

"No good, I guess?"

"Yeah... Hmm, I think you'll get it after Mitsuki-chan explains."

Iris sighed. At this moment, Mitsuki returned with rapid footsteps.

"Nii-san."

Mitsuki stared coldly at me.

"Man... Don't make such a scary look. I did manage to make a shield."

"Yes, indeed it is a shield of iron, however—It is not only too small but also too thin. Something like that cannot be used as a shield. Added to that is the fact that

throwing dark matter is a completely pointless move. It wastes too much time before transmutation completes and there was also a deviation from the target location."

"In other words, failure?"

"Indeed."

Mitsuki nodded clearly.

I guess using my usual method really did not work. Just as Mitsuki said earlier, my methods were apparently considered unorthodox in Midgard.

"Kyah! Mononobe failed too! We're comrades!"

"Don't get so happy over there!"

I retorted back at Iris who was overjoyed to find someone else in the same boat as her.

"Then next, Nii-san, please attempt to destroy the diamond, even though I have a bad feeling about this."

At Mitsuki's behest, I stood at the spot for aiming at the diamond. This time, the distance was 100m.

If attacking a target at long range, I could not think of anything apart from guns.

Anti-materiel armament—AT Ishtar.

I let the blueprint in my mind flow into the extracted dark matter, turning it into a long ranged anti-materiel weapon.

What appeared in my hand was an anti-materiel rifle similar in appearance to the Nergal.

The gun's body was longer than Nergal's. The grip was not meant to be held in one hand and the gun had to be held with the stock against the shoulder.

Although its design differed from ordinary firearms, its mass production model was also used by NIFL.

While the rifle's heavy mass weighed on my arms, my entire body instantly felt enveloped in a light sense of fatigue.

A D's ability was not an endless power.

Extracting dark matter required concentration and transmutation caused strain to the mind. Repeated use

would cause extreme stress to accumulate in both the body and the mind.

"Sigh..."

I heard Mitsuki's heavy sigh from beside me.

It looked like this method was unorthodox too.

Although I felt the result was already decided, I still took a prone posture on the ground and aimed at the target. Ishtar's effective range easily exceeded a kilometer . Sniping a block of diamond 100m away was a piece of cake.

I pulled the trigger to snipe the diamond.

The gunshot echoed throughout the training site while a small amount of diamond fragments flew apart.

"How's that? It caused a bit of damage—"

I looked up at Mitsuki and inquired, but seeing her expression that read "utterly hopeless," I could not bring myself to finish my sentence.

"So wrong it is absurd, Nii-san. Lack of firepower is admittedly an issue, but if weapons were going to be used, there would be no need to deploy Ds in the first place. Just leave things to soldiers equipped with existing weapons. What we are hoping for are more practical and destructive ways of attack."

"Even if you say that... I can't think of any other ways. I can only make a shield of that size. Mitsuki, you should know the amount of dark matter I can generate each time , right?"

Although I was answering Mitsuki, Iris was the one who reacted.

"Really? How much can you generate each time, Mononobe?"

"In the case of transmutation, roughly ten kilograms after conversion. That's my limit."

"T-Ten kilograms!? Are you using the wrong unit!? Ignoring issues of control, every D without exception can make at least ten tons, you know?"

"Kilogram is the right unit. Do you wanna have a look at my dragon mark? The size of a dragon mark will change according to the ability to generate dark matter. After seeing it, you'll understand the gap between us."

With self-deprecation, I showed her the back of my left hand.

"Eh? Where is it?"

"Here... This is it."

"No way—This tiny pattern? Liar... Is yours that tiny, Mononobe? So tiny... Too tiny!"

"Stop calling me tiny! It's very hurtful!"

Her words stabbed into my heart. I cried out while enduring the mental trauma.

"I like Nii-san's dragon mark. It is like a little snake, very cute."

"Uh... Your defense actually makes me feel worse."

Mitsuki's comment made me hang my head in dejection. Iris left me on the side and walked over to the auxiliary test position.

"Iris-san, are you intending to use mithril to create a shield again?"

"Eh, that is my intention..."

Upon hearing Iris' answer, Mitsuki made a strict look. I thought she was going to tell Iris to stop, but after some consideration, Mitsuki said:

"Indeed, it would not be training if there is a fear of failure... But considering the possibility of explosions, please lower the transmutation amount as much as possible."

"O-Okay. I get it."

Hearing Mitsuki's serious suggestion, Iris nodded in agreement then manifested her staff of dark matter.

"Caduceus!"

Aiming the staff at the target, she chanted words like an incantation.

"Come, come, fragments of the Far Beyond..."

Multiple pieces of dark matter appeared near the target marker. As before, her precision was the only thing correct.

"O holy silver, transform!"

BOOM!

Just like last time, an explosion happened in the middle of transmutation.

I knew it...

Because the result was as expected, Mitsuki and I were not surprised. Due to the smaller amounts, the air current from the explosion only managed to blow strands of hair.

"A-Ahaha... Umm, Mitsuki-chan... Can I try the attacking test too?"

Iris smiled dryly and asked Mitsuki.

"No problem... But do not perform excessively dangerous transmutations, okay?"

"Okay, no problem! Because what I'm transmuting is the safest substance, air."

Iris forced a smile and replied then moved to the marked location.

Will she be okay?

Attacking a block of diamond should be harder than making a shield.

I watched over Iris in worry.

Iris faced the diamond, raised her staff and chanted an incantation. This time, dark matter appeared in front of her staff.

She intended to accelerate the mass transmuted from dark matter to smash into the diamond, right? It would not count as an attack unless the impact was raised in such a painstaking manner.

Staring at the target, Iris called out in a shrill voice:

"O bullet of wind, crush it!"

Powerful wind began to blow in Iris' surroundings. The blowing dust made the wind's currents vaguely visible. Iris looked like she intended to fire a projectile of a massive amount of compressed air.

Diamond was surprisingly fragile against pure shock, hence this was not a bad choice. Depending on the air's compression ratio and speed, perhaps it could produce an impact capable of breaking diamond.

But things would be bad if this move failed...

Although she was using harmless air, in order to create a projectile of compressed air, she had transmuted quite a large amount, if she were to accidentally lose control—

BOOM!!

"Kyawa!?"

The foreboding feeling came true. The compressed air exploded, blowing Iris into the air.

"Iris!"

Prepared in advance, I instantly dashed towards where she was going to fall.

Arriving calmly this time, I caught the falling Iris.

"Seriously... You're always getting blown away."

I supported Iris' body with both arms and sighed.

"T-Thank you... Mononobe."

Perhaps feeling ashamed of her failure, she was blushing when she thanked me. That look of hers was especially adorable, forcing me to become aware of the current situation. Feeling Iris' body warmth and suppleness up close, it made my heart begin to pound.

"Although I expected it... You're not good at controlling the transmutation of air, right? It exploded in front of you just now, didn't it?"

"Yeah... Because air is so intangible, it's difficult to imagine... It feels like even if I want to control it, the air slips out from between my fingers... Then it explodes in a weird place."

"That's really... tough."

"It is very tough..."

We both sighed heavily.

At our first encounter at the beach, Iris was probably blown away in a similar manner.

"Nii-san, Iris-san, how much longer do you plan on sticking to each other?"

Mitsuki walked over and glared at us harshly.

"Oh..."

Iris and I looked at each other from up close then frantically separated.

"Helping each other is a good thing but please refrain from excessive skin contact."

"Y-Yes..."

"Very well, after witnessing your practice attempts, I think I can offer some advice based on what I saw."

Saying that, Mitsuki pointed at me first.

"Given Nii-san's volume of dark matter generation, making an acceptable shield is impossible. Hence, please give up on the auxiliary test."

"Man... You're totally merciless. That means I can only try the diamond breaking challenge?"

"Correct, but the use of real firearms and ammunition is forbidden. Please take the test by creating a fictional armament like the rest of us. As for the form of your armament... Right, how about a gun, since you are so adept at using guns? If you fire dark matter by picturing a bullet, your speed and accuracy should increase."

Apparently, damaging the diamond by shooting it with a gun like just now was not within assessment standards.

However, that could not be helped. If anti-materiel rifles of this level worked in actual combat, NIFL would have taken out Basilisk a long time ago.

In order to pass the test, there was no other way apart from learning effective attacks against dragons in the Midgard way of doing things.

"A fictional armament as a gun huh... I remember you said it's best to reference weapons of legend as the prototype, right? But there aren't any legends about guns , a modern weapon, are there?"

"I think not... Just interpreting it loosely is fine. Ultimately, what matters is that you do not cause accidental transmutation, so even a fictional firearm of your own creation would be fine."

"That's really vague..."

I grumbled, only to see Mitsuki's displeased look.

"Precisely because you need to make a vague fictional weapon, that is why it is better to be more vague. But for you, Nii-san, whose imagination is lacking, perhaps it might be too tall an order. Shall I help you think of one?"

"Sure... You're right, Mitsuki. Thanks."

Because I did not think I was suited to the task either, I agreed with Mitsuki's suggestion.

"Understood. Then let us first decide the name, let me think... I believe Siegfried is a very cool name."

Mitsuki gazed at me with especially excited eyes. I think I might have turned on some kind of weird switch in her.

"Siegfried, you say... I remember that's a hero's name rather than a weapon, right?"

"Although not a weapon, he is a master archer. Close enough in traits!"

"Close enough...?"

I tilted my head in puzzlement, but Mitsuki ignored me and continued:

"It is an image! Just an image! Please think of it as a powerful gun. You get too hung up on trivial details, Nii-san. Do you not find your blood boiling with excitement after hearing this name!?"

Mitsuki clenched her fist before her chest while she asserted to me forcefully.

In the end, so that was the most important point.

Mitsuki liked acting cool since a long time ago. Simply stated, she was predisposed to eighth grader syndrome

and the it looked like the precursor of that syndrome had been quietly growing for the past three years.

"...Got it, anyway, so let's name it Siegfried."

Under Mitsuki's hard sell, I reluctantly agreed.

"Great! I will sketch the overall shape for you later! Please use it for reference when imagining it!"

Mitsuki nodded especially happily. The way she looked still showed a little of her innocence from three years ago remaining.

Then Mitsuki came back to her senses, controlled her expression and coughed lightly.

"Ahem, so next is Iris-san."

"Yes!"

Iris instantly stood with her back very straight, waiting for Mitsuki's advice.

"Because your air projectile is too unstable, Iris-san, you should probably focus on shield construction in the auxiliary test. However... Even if you do that, it is

honestly quite uncertain whether you could succeed in time for the test next week. After all, I have never heard of any precedent for explosions arising in the process of transmuting mithril."

I interjected and asked:

"Is mithril exploding that rare?"

"You can say it is impossible. Mithril is the most sturdy and stable substance. Even if the transmutation failed, the metal proportions might be wrong or changed into similar metals... Probably something along those lines. The chances of mixing an explosive substance into it are extremely low."

"In a certain sense, she is quite amazing huh..."

"Yes, perhaps it could be called a kind of talent. Although people might be better or worse at transmutation due to variations in personality or inborn disposition, since it involves one's imagination... Iris-san is the only D who causes explosions no matter what she transmutes."

Mitsuki nodded somewhat sardonically.

However, her comment brought a flash of inspiration to me.

"In short, Iris cannot do what is perfectly natural, but unintentionally achieves what other Ds can't do even if they wanted to?"

"Wah!?"

Iris looked like she was almost into tears.

"Rather than a talent... It would be better to call it a disposition that is completely opposite. If that's the case, it's probably futile no matter how much you practice something you're not suited to."

"Mononobe... You're so mean, don't put it so bluntly..."

Iris looked at me like she was about to cry.

"Don't get the wrong idea, I'm not trying to put you down, rather, I'm praising you. Iris, you have a talent that's unique to you. Seeing as that's the case, you only need to hone that talent. There's no need to force yourself to do the same things as the other people around you."

"A talent... unique to me?"

"Yeah, Iris, instead of shield construction, you should focus on your talent—Blow up that thing."

I smiled proudly and pointed to the block of diamond.

Part 5

Everyday life was something that would pass day by day before you knew it, as soon as time started to flow.

Whether the tropical island scenery that I initially mistook for a parallel world, the school filled with female students, or the vibes of not fitting in the class, everything gradually became so matter-of-fact.

In just a few days, I already felt like I had been living this current life since a long time ago. The previous everyday life seemed so distant instead.

Getting up every morning at 6:30 to eat breakfast with Mitsuki then go to school, attending lessons on ordinary subjects, taking care of lunch through the snack shop or the cafeteria, attending D-related courses in the afternoon , staying after school to train on days when the training site was free.

The days passed like that and it was finally the day before the test.

Because it was a holiday today, there were no classes and the whole day could be used for training.

Under Mitsuki's supervision, Iris and I had been carrying out our final special training since morning.

"Ahhh, I'm so hungry... I can't move anymore, Mononobe..."

Using up all her physical energy on repeated transmutations, Iris was lying on the ground, looking at me with hopeful eyes.

"...I'm hungry too. I'm heading to the snack shop so let me buy you something while I'm at it. What do you want ?"

Left without a choice, I could only ask her proactively. Iris suddenly sat up and recited her demands.

"Yakisoba bread, curry bread, porkchop cutlet sandwich, club sandwich and a donut for dessert!"

"...That's a lot."

"Because I'm so famished!"

"I'm not responsible if you get fat."

I reminded her, causing Iris to immediately go "ooh" and fall silent.

"I-It's okay! I will work even harder to consume the calories I ate!"

"Fine. Mitsuki, how do you want to take care of lunch?"

I asked Mitsuki who seemed to be working on her portable terminal.

"Please buy me bread. Apart from curry bread, anything will do. Also, a drink."

Afraid of spicy food, Mitsuki answered without even looking at me.

"Got it, then I'll go buy the stuff."

I left them behind in the training site and took the elevator to the first floor of the school building.

The snack shop was located in the catering building linked to the school building through a corridor. To accommodate the different ethnicities and nationalities of the Ds, the catering building was divided into Japanese, French, Chinese, Vietnamese and other areas.

Arranged in the first floor of the catering building was a cafeteria as well as all kinds of vendor spaces.

After buying lunch for Iris, Mitsuki and myself, I was just about to return directly to the training site when I noticed familiar students seated inside the cafeteria.

My classmates Lisa, Firill, Ren and Ariella were sitting around the same table.

Although I felt hesitant on what I should do, presented with this rare opportunity, I walked over to them.

Though I did not expect a friendly response even if I greeted them, I knew I would never be able to get closer to my classmates if I let fear prevent me from taking steps forward.

"Uh, *hello*~"

"...Why are you suddenly speaking in English?"

Probably having noticed my presence early on, Lisa glared viciously at me as soon as I greeted them.

"Uh, I was thinking you seem European-born, Lisa."

"You are indeed correct... But there is no need for you to think so much. That would only fill me with disgust."

"Really? Then good day to you."

"Yes, good day to you—Oh no, I greeted accidentally! You laid another trap for me!"

Lisa accused me angrily. She probably remembered her declaration to never greet me.

"Sorry, I did that on purpose just now."

I replied honestly.

"Eww! What pleasure is there in making fun of me!?"

"I'm not making fun of you. But to be honest, it makes me glad that I can talk to you."

"What..."

Lisa's face went red, her mouth opening and closing, unable to speak.

"After all, Lisa, you're the only one who answers me..."

I sighed and looked at my other classmates. Although they all saw me, none of them responded, unlike Lisa.

But I did not get disheartened here. Renewing my spirits, I said to Firill who was sitting opposite to Lisa:

"It's rare to see you girls gathered together outside of the classroom."

"...Really?"

Originally eating a sandwich, Firill paused and tilted her head in puzzlement. Her neat bangs swayed accordingly.

"Yeah, because all of you tend to leave the classroom separately during lunch breaks, right? I thought you would never do things together."

Hearing that, Firil looked at me, somewhat displeased.

"...Nothing of that sort. It's very normal to have lunch together if we meet up by coincidence."

"It's coincidence?"

Firill nodded.

Someone tugged my sleeve from the side. Ren showed me her portable terminal.

'While Ariella and I were having lunch, Lisa and Firill happened to come, but we didn't call for you.'

Ren glared at me a little uneasily.

"...You're right, you didn't call for me, but there shouldn't be any problem with chatting, right? Eh? There's something on your face."

I reached out and took off the bread crumb stuck on Ren's cheek.

"!?"

Ren instantly went red in the face and shook her head, making "Mm! Mm!" growls in her mouth.

"Oh sorry, I couldn't help it..."

Accidentally doing what I used to do with Mitsuki when we were young, I apologized to Ren.

"Mm!"

Ren pouted and waved her hand to shoo me away.

"...I got it. I won't disturb your meal anymore."

I sighed but just as I turned around to leave, a unexpected voice stopped me.

"Hold on."

I looked back to see Ariella staring straight at me.

"What's up?"

"I remember you are currently doing something like special training with Iris, right?"

"Not something like special training, we are doing special training. We started since this morning. I came here to buy lunch."

I showed Ariella the bag filled with bread.

"Oh... Any progress?"

"You're curious?"

I asked her in return and Ariella nodded honestly.

"Yeah. Currently, Iris might not only fail to bolster our forces but even drag us down. If her abilities have improved, I'd feel very glad."

"You don't sound very hopeful."

Hearing me, Ariella shrugged.

"Can't be helped, Iris hasn't improved at all in the past year after transferring here. I don't think a few days of special training could change her much."

"...You're so upfront with your words, Ariella."

"Are you offended?"

Ariella peered at me and asked.

"No, I'm not. I like this kind of personality."

"L-Like?"

I answered her honestly but for some reason, Ariella acted awkwardly.

"What's wrong?"

"I-Is that a confession? It's a confession, right!?"

Hearing Ariella ask me with a red face, I panicked as well.

"Huh? How did things get to that kind of topic?"

"N-No...? Y-You are such a thoughtless guy. Don't say this kind of thing lightly to girls."

Ariella glared at me with a serious look.

"Although it wasn't a confession, I didn't say it lightly either. I simply said what I actually thought. So, what I'm going to say next is serious too. Ariella, in the test tomorrow, Iris will surely surprise you. I guarantee that to all of you."

Hearing me, Lisa and the others frowned. All of them showed skepticism on their faces.

Amidst all this, only Ariella laughed with delight.

"How confident you are, but I still don't believe you, so I can't believe what you just said. Tomorrow, if I find out you're not lying, I'll revise my opinion of you."

"Good, you should look forward to it."

I nodded but Lisa interrupted at this time.

"You keep talking about Iris-san, but what about yourself? Since you are doing special training, I hope you will show us some results."

"I basically have results already. I finally managed to make a fictional armament not too long ago."

Hearing my answer, Lisa only felt exasperated.

"What...? Isn't that the most basic of basics!? You are training from that level? In such a state, you can't possibly pass the test!"

"It is very difficult for sure, but I will do my best. Bye now."

I waved and left their table for real this time.

Feeling their gazes against my back, I walked out of the catering building to get back to Iris and Mitsuki.

After lunch, we resumed the special training—

Part 6

"Well then, let the test begin to select the Counter-Dragon Squad for the battle against Basilisk."

Shinomiya-sensei's voice echoed in the vast underground space.

After spending a whole day on special training, I slept especially well and the next day, the test, arrived in the blink of an eye.

Like last time, we were gathered in training site number three. Volunteers began the test first.

"I shall show off first."

The first to be tested was Lisa Highwalker. Tossing her long blonde hair, she walked up front.

"Watch, Mononobe Yuu! I will make you understand what is called a gap in levels!"

Perhaps thinking of yesterday's conversation, Lisa stared only at me when she spoke.

The very image of confidence, she walked over there with her chest out and head held high, arriving at the spot to target the diamond.

"Gungnir!"

Lisa's fictional armament was apparently a spear. Holding the golden shining spear at waist height, she aimed the sharp spear tip at the block of diamond.

"Here I go—Pierce, flare!"

The spear tip emitted a brilliant glow, shooting out a flash of light. The light pierced the diamond, boring a hole in the wall behind.

"A-A laser beam..."

Watching from afar, I could not help but mutter in shock. Diamond was not a particularly heat-resistant material, hence attacking with heat was a correct decision . But to instantly bore a large hole in diamond, that firepower was extraordinary.

Rather than a laser, this move would be closer to a positron cannon.

Lisa achieved the task easily and returned to the standby area proudly.

"Hmph."

Lisa leaned her back against the wall, taunting me with her gaze. Her expression seemed to be saying: Just try it if you think you can.

This competitiveness was not a bad thing. Back in my NIFL days, this was commonplace. It filled me with fighting spirit instead.

Next to be tested was the bibliophile, Firill. Gazing at the diamond with tired eyes, she raised one hand in front of her chest.

"Come—Necronomicon."

Firill shaped the dark matter into a book's form and held it on her hand. As though reciting an incantation, she said:

"Aero Blast Quartet."

I heard four consecutive sounds of heavy impacts then shattered diamond fragments scattered in the air.

It was probably four shots of extremely compressed air projectiles, aimed at the exactly same place. A truly astounding show of force.

Apparently, like Iris, she pictured magic to perform transmutation. Judging from this, so-called picturing magic seemed to offer much more freedom than using a weapon.

Then it was Ren. She apparently chose to break diamond instead of participating in the auxiliary test.

"...Mjolnir."

Ren raised her slender arm to the air and lightly spoke the name of the fictional armament to be manifested. Then a hammer several times her body size appeared in her hand.

The hammer could be seen growing gigantic in size, almost reaching the ceiling. Even though I knew in my mind that it was massless dark matter, it was still a strange scene lacking in balance.

That kind of generated volume was extraordinary. Converted into matter, let alone ten tons, it might even reach a hundred times more than that.

"Mm."

Ren then swung the enlarged hammer down. In the process of falling, the hammer grew even larger. Finally, the hammer's tip arrived on top of the diamond.

Then the hammer's tip glowed red and started to materialize. Obtaining mass, the hammer accelerated towards the diamond, drawn by gravity.

Unable to withstand that kind of shock and weight, the diamond shattered.

Ren walked back nonchalantly. Next to step up was Ariella. She walked over to the auxiliary test's position.

"Sensei, I choose this side."

Ariella informed Shinomiya-sensei of her intent to take the shield making challenge. Raising her right hand to shoulder height, she called out sharply:

"Aegis."

Dark matter instantly covered Ariella's right arm. Her fictional armament looked like a gauntlet.

"Deploy shield."

Ariella swung her right arm and yelled. Spherical dark matter instantly appeared over the marked spot 50m away. Like Iris, Ariella seemed to have excellent spatial awareness.

The dark matter gradually turned into a giant wall and not just one, it was a multi-layered structure.

Compared to the thin iron plate I created earlier, it was on a completely different level.

Ariella easily passed the test. When returning, she whispered to me:

"...Show me proof of what you said yesterday."

"Yeah."

I nodded affirmatively.

Because Mitsuki seemed to be standing in the same position as Shinomiya-sensei, supervising the test together, only Iris and I were left.

"So Iris, I'll go first?"

"Sure, good luck! Mononobe, do your best!"

With Iris' energetic blessing, I walked over to the diamond side.

"What... Are you serious?"

Lisa cried out in disbelief. She probably did not expect me to choose the more difficult side.

"I'm serious, because this is the only test which I have a chance of passing."

I smiled wryly at Lisa and answered, then stood in position.

I knew quite well this was very difficult.

But to give courage to Iris who was taking the test next , I hoped I could succeed.

"—Siegfried."

I focused to change the form of the generated dark matter.

Appearing in my right hand was a large-caliber ornamental gun.

This was the fictional armament belonging to me, based on the sketch Mitsuki had given me.

Because the gun's body seemed quite small compared to its caliber, were it a real gun, one would worry whether such a design could withstand the recoil of a shot, but since this was purely dark matter whose shape had been altered, there was no need to worry about practicality.

The gun glowed with faint phosphorescence. Although I was trying hard to keep it in the dark matter stage, due to sensing the image in my mind, the gun's body still caused some slight transmutation.

That was the reason why dark matter, which was supposed to be black, had color after being turned into fictional armaments.

Holding this Siegfried, I was finally standing at Midgard's starting line.

But this fictional armament probably could not be used in the same way as Lisa's and the other girls'.

My dark matter generating capacity was extremely low. To create Siegfried, I had already used almost my entire output.

Even after making their fictional armaments, Lisa and the others still had spare capacity to perform another summoning of dark matter. Consuming the dark matter in the fictional armament would be an emergency measure only used as a last resort.

But I had no choice but to use that emergency last resort. Even by keeping consumption at a minimum, including the amount used to create Siegfried, the amount of dark matter I could fire as bullets was only three shots at most. And firing consecutively was not possible either. Once consumed, even the fictional armament itself would disappear.

That meant I had to repeat the step of creating Siegfried all over again. This dead time could sometimes be fatal in real combat.

Hence, I must use these three shots of dark matter cautiously. However—

It would be pointless to save on consumption here. I had to gather all my dark matter to concentrate in one shot.

I aimed the muzzle at the block of diamond 100m away.

Even so, I did not know if this would bring the result I sought.

Although I had practiced repeatedly before the test, my success rate was below 50%.

Right now, all I could do was try my best. That was all.

Telling myself that, I started to conceptualize the image.

Then I was going to perform the initial transmutation of air.

I chose air not because it was simple but because even a dark matter generating capacity of merely ten

kilograms would have a volume of over ten thousand liters once transmuted into air. By compressing that air, it was possible to obtain a massive amount of heat as well as the necessary hardness.

But that also required controlling it well—

"Air Bullet."

I spoke as though tracing out the outline of my mental image.

When performing transmutation, the step of voicing things out was not particularly required, but language would help stabilize the image. For the sake of raising the success rate as much as possible, I had to use words to describe what I was transmuting next.

I slowly increased the pressure on the trigger and transmitted the image over.

Without a sufficient compression ratio, the bullet would not bring out enough power.

Conversely, if the compression ratio was too high, particle collisions would turn the superheated air into plasma, releasing all the energy and disappearing before it struck the target.

I had always performed pure transmutation in the past , so my control of this type of thought-driven power was quite crude.

Fire.

Speaking softly in my mind, I pulled the trigger.

In that instant, the dark matter in the fictional armament was completely transmuted into a bullet of air. Siegfried vanished.

The air bullet that was fired was not supposed to be visible to the naked eye.

But my eyes captured some faint white light.

Crap, did it create plasma?

Then silence spread.

There was no sound of an air bullet striking the block of diamond. The plasmafied bullet probably had not struck the diamond.

"See, all bravado without a plan. It's not too late to start now. I believe you would be best advised to attempt the auxiliary test instead."

Lisa broke the silence and spoke as though boasting of victory.

Shinomiya-sensei nodded too and said as though trying to persuade me:

"Indeed, this test is too difficult for a novice. How about you switch to constructing a shield?"

Even if they said that, a large enough shield was impossible due to my low dark matter generating capacity. Hence, for me, that test was completely impossible to pass.

As much as I hated to admit defeat, this was the best I could do. I could only give up on the test.

"No, I have already—"

I was about to decline Shinomiya-sensei's offer of the auxiliary test.

However, Mitsuki interrupted this time.

"Excuse me, please wait a moment. I believe it is too soon to discuss results."

Mitsuki walked over to the block of diamond with clearly heard footsteps.

Seeing that, Lisa frowned and scolded her.

"Mitsuki-san, have you not given up yet? Even if he is your relative, one would be hard pressed to approve of your prejudice in favoring him."

"I am not favoring him but merely inspecting fairly."

Mitsuki walked while answering, stopping next to the diamond.

Anyone would think it was a failure from a glance, but Mitsuki seemed to have sensed something unusual.

She carefully examined the diamond then turned her head back to us and said loudly:

"Next to the hole bored by Lisa-san, I have discovered an inconspicuous but carbonized portion! Since it is found on the front and back of the diamond, it is very likely the traces left behind by the penetration of a super high-temperature object."

"What..."

Lisa exclaimed in shock but I was equally surprised.

"Oh...?"

Shinomiya-sensei's expression changed and she walked over to Mitsuki.

The two of them conversed at the diamond for a while then returned before me.

"Hmm... There is indeed a carbonized portion but there is no mark on the wall behind... The bullet probably plasmafied only during the instant of penetrating the diamond. Mononobe Yuu, was this an outcome within your expectation?"

Shinomiya-sensei directed her sharp gaze towards me.

"Huh? Oh no... I only did it by chance."

If I claimed it as my own power now, perhaps I might pass the test, but I answered honestly.

What I originally predicted was striking the diamond with the air bullet, shattering it. I did not think of using plasmafication's heat to carbonize the diamond.

Even if I was asked to do it again, due to the difficulty in adjusting the timing and compression, I would probably fail.

"Hmm, that's quite a shame. Judging purely from this one attack, this would be very intricate and efficient transmutation... The probability of causing effective damage to Basilisk is very high. But if you can't do it at will, you have not reached the level required for the Counter-Dragon Squad."

"Then I guess I failed, after all?"

Hearing me ask that, Shinomiya-sensei crossed her arms and made a troubled look.

"Hmm... But you did succeed during the test after all. In any case, I'll pass you and have you listed as a reserve member. Although you cannot be considered combat

potential right now, depending on your future growth, promoting you to take part in the battle against Basilisk is not impossible, so work hard and strive for progress."

"T-Thank you very much!"

My stiff shoulders instantly relaxed then I thanked Shinomiya-sensei.

But when I returned to the standby area, Lisa glared at me like she found things difficult to accept.

"A mere coincidence on one occasion, I shall not approve! And even if you could use that attack in a well-trained manner, the fact of your vast inferiority to me is still clearly evident!"

Lisa pointed at the diamond and declared.

The laser-bored hole was visible clearly even at this distance, but the carbonized hole was almost invisible. This indicated the gap between our firepower.

"Yeah, you girls are amazing, Lisa. I understand that clearly now, after this test. It's true that I am vastly inferior to you girls."

"M-My, you are unexpectedly honest."

Lisa showed surprise on her face as she tilted her head in puzzlement.

"I am accepting results honestly. But though I am a reserve member, since the teacher passed me, it means there are things I can accomplish. As a member of Midgard, I will work hard to assist everyone."

"Hmph... We have no need of your power! Having us is enough."

"But Shinomiya-sensei told me to work hard and improve."

Hearing that, Lisa wavered a little but immediately retorted.

"That is... merely etiquette! The teacher only said that to be considerate for Mitsuki-san's feelings!"

"Considerate for Mitsuki... There's no need, right? Shinomiya-sensei's rank is higher."

I felt speechless but Lisa puffed out her chest and asserted as though she had some kind of proof:

"She must be worried about not getting to eat Mitsuki-san's sweets again! As reluctant as I am to admit it, the sweets Mitsuki-san occasionally makes for us are quite a delicacy! Addictive with just a single bite, even Shinomiya-sensei must find it impossible to resist that kind of temptation."

"Wow... Are Mitsuki's sweets that delicious?"

This was my first time hearing of this. Because the menus were usually left to the housework robots, I did not know that Mitsuki's cooking had improved so much.

Perhaps these sweets were an important contribution to Mitsuki's overwhelming popularity.

Bribery with food... These words crossed my mind.

"Your face suggests you are thinking something rude, you know?"

"...You're overthinking things. But anyway, please confirm your allegations regarding sweets with Shinomiya-sensei herself."

Lisa's grumbling looked like it was going to continue for a long time, so I prepared to leave.

"Wait! Mononobe Yuu! I haven't finished talking yet!"

Getting rid of the persistently harassing Lisa, I returned to my original spot, only to see Iris clapping to greet me.

"Clap clap, Mononobe, congratulations!"

Seeing Iris smiling happily for me as though she had passed the test herself, I suddenly felt embarrassed.

"I only passed as a reserve member. Okay, you're next, Iris."

"Y-Yes... I will do my best!"

Iris stood up and walked over to the block of diamond.

"Just do the same as during training. Give everyone a big surprise. Let them never dare call you a poorly performing student again."

"Yes!!"

Iris looked back and nodded in agreement then reached the spot to aim at the diamond.

After informing Shinomiya-sensei she was not taking the auxiliary test, she manifested her staff of dark matter.

"Caduceus!"

Iris pointed the staff's tip at the diamond then focused. Seeing that, Lisa came to talk to me.

"...Mononobe Yuu."

"What's the matter? If you still want to continue the conversation just now, I'll have to ask you to give me a break."

"No, shelve that conversation for now. What is important now is... Aren't you going to rescue Iris-san? She will surely be blown away again, won't she?"

Rather than sarcastic, her tone was more worried. I smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, that's right, it will probably be blown away—I mean the diamond."

"What... Are you serious? You heard Ariella-san yesterday at the cafeteria, didn't you? Iris-san is hopeless as a poorly performing student. Her memory is poor, she

is not smart enough. No matter how hard she tries, she is just a silly kid who is wasting her effort."

Seeing that I had made no move to help Iris, Lisa frantically tried to persuade me.

"Yeah... I guess that might be true. But even while saying that, you're actually observing her quite closely."

"N-Nothing of that sort! We have been in the same class for a year already, so understanding her is only natural. Ever since transferring here, Iris-san has never succeeded in using her power before, even the most basic air bullet also—"

"What Iris wants to do is not transmuting dark matter into air."

I interrupted Lisa.

"Eh... Could it be a transmutation of even greater difficulty? That would be even more impossible!"

"Okay, just watch. You'll surely be surprised."

Saying that, I turned my gaze back to Iris.

She could be heard chanting a spell quietly.

"Come, come, fragments of the Far Beyond—"

Multiple black spheres of dark matter appeared in the diamond's surroundings. Iris' excellent spatial awareness had correct judged the distance of 100m.

Then staring at the diamond, Iris recited:

"—O holy silver, explode!"

The dark matter gathered in a point then turned into mithril shining with silver luster.

It was like how she wanted to create a shield last time. But during transmutation this time, countless bulges appeared on the mithril.

Then the entire thing expanded—It exploded.

BOOM!!

The mithril's sharp fragments were sent flying, accompanied by a silver-white explosion. Mithril of maximum hardness smashed and penetrated the diamond, causing it to break apart.

That destructive power far surpassed my plasma bullet. Because Iris had giving them directionality, the fragments only flew forward.

After the special training after school, we came to understand one thing. As long as Iris was aiming for an explosion, she could control things to a certain extent.

"What a... unique talent."

I said with a wry smile. From a dragon's standpoint, it would be like a mithril grenade suddenly appearing in front of it. This would most likely become a means of attack to inflict definite damage on dragons.

"No way... To think that Iris-san would...?"

Lisa looked at the destroyed diamond, her entire body stunned. Normally expressionless, Firill and Ren also showed surprised looks on their faces.

Ariella stood up to applaud for Iris. She had no patience for those lacking in power but conversely, she would offer her respect if one could win her approval. That seemed to be Ariella's personality.

"Iris Freyja, you pass."

Shinomiya-sensei also seemed to be in a state of surprise as she announced the test result to Iris.

Hearing this, Iris instantly had a smile all over her face . Then turning towards me, she dashed at full speed.

"H-Hey!?"

"I did it! Mononobe!!"

With momentum from her sprint, she hugged me. In order to dissipate the impact, I spun her several times, keeping my balance with much difficulty.

"What are you doing so suddenly—"

I was just about to complain when I saw Iris' face in front of my eyes. Feeling the warmth from her body, tightly pressed against me, I could not help but forget what I was going to say.

"Thank you, Mononobe... Thank you!"

Leaning her face against my chest, Iris kept thanking me.

—Was she that happy?

During this past year, Iris had always been treated as a poorly performing student. I could not imagine what it felt like. Despite a strong will to keep trying, her power did not reach standards. This chagrin was something only Iris herself could understand.

However, the emotional stress accumulated would be quite heavy.

—Anyway, I'll just wait until her emotions calm down.

Although the surrounding gazes concerned me too, I could not bring myself to push Iris away by force. I could only pat her silver hair gently and praise her for passing the test.

"Nii-san, remember what I said about refraining from excessive skin contact—"

Hurrying over, Mitsuki also sighed after seeing the way Iris looked.

"—Thirty more seconds only."

Then Mitsuki feigned indifference and said that.

Chapter 3 - "White" Leviathan

Part 1

I defied the destiny he had decided for me.

No matter what kind of battlefield I was sent to, I always accomplished the mission without killing anyone.

Perhaps it was like acting obstinately out of spite. Normal common sense and morals would easily crumble against the education I received. In order to protect my beliefs that must not be compromised, relying on logic and conscience was not enough.

I did not want to become the type of person he hoped for. I wanted to continue being Mitsuki's brother. Feelings of this sort supported my obstinacy.

However, no matter how much I struggled, I always felt a premonition that everything would end up in futility.

He did not reprimand me for my persistent resistance. As long as I produced satisfactory results, he even praised me.

Hence, I knew clearly that I was still under his control.

Even if I still managed to keep my hands untainted, from past to present, the day for my hands to be tainted would inevitably arrive.

So long as I continued to fight under NIFL, that destiny was impossible to change.

It was ultimately just a matter of time.

I was sent to battlefields that were countries where public order had broken down due to dragons passing through. Those kinds of places were mostly in civil war to begin with.

Using dragons as excuses, NIFL kept intervening in regional conflicts.

Brothers-in-arms fighting alongside me gradually increased, their numbers finally settled at eight.

They were young men brought from other places, each possessing their own outstanding talents.

Named Sleipnir, my team galloped on numerous battlefields.

According to *him*, there was apparently an intended enemy we were meant to fight. Putting down guerilla groups was just practice before the real battle. Nevertheless, we were still risking our lives all the time.

In a world where life and death were thinly divided, how much longer could I act obstinately out of spite?

Was defiance more important than my own life?

These thoughts always occupied my mind during fighting.

Also, I was probably still going to turn into a killer in emergency situations. Somewhere in my heart, the notion of giving up had already manifested.

Because I had already become a person who could actually kill provided I wanted to.

I had already been remade into that kind of person.

My trigger finger no longer trembled from my conscience's reprimands. Neither did it hesitate in pity for the target.

Before arriving at NIFL, I had already lost my sense of fear.

I possessed all the requirements to become a killer.

Ironically, the reason why I had the luxury of acting out of spite was because he had made me strong.

Purely because I was not strained, I had the luxury of choosing whether to kill or not, hence I chose not to kill.

Once that slack was lost, my resistance was probably going to end.

That was what I originally thought, but—

"I won't lose!"

The day I was liberated from NIFL, I met the strongest human out of all the opponents I had faced so far—a D—and fought her.

She was actually not that dangerous a person, but from my perspective in ignorance, she was a monster with firepower surpassing tanks.

To eliminate the lethal threat, my body moved on its own. Faster than my thoughts, subconscious intent to kill had already sprung into action in advance.

But that was not my first time encountering a life threatening crisis. Even when faced with a gun in front of my face, I had always handled situations calmly in composure.

The reason why I lost that composure so easily that time... was most likely because she was a D.

Encountering the intended enemy, the monster growing inside me bared its fangs on its own.

But I used my willpower to stop the swing of my arm.

I defied the reason of my own existence.

I chose not to kill her.

I made that choice successfully.

Hence, I owed her a debt impossible to repay.

Because she—Iris—proved that my spite-fueled obstinacy was more important than my own life.

Part 2

The day the test ended, dinner was a bit different from usual.

"This is—?"

After the dishes were cleared off the table and I saw the food brought by the housework robot, I asked Mitsuki who was sitting opposite me across the table.

"Is it not obvious? This is dessert!"

"Dessert? Why just today..."

Baked pudding topped with cream. Bits of chocolate were even sprinkled beautifully over it. Looking at this dessert, I inquired of her.

"Although you only qualified as backup, this is to reward you for passing, Nii-san, because I believe that hard work should be commended."

Without looking at me, Mitsuki answered in an indifferent tone of voice.

"Uh, it looks really tasty. Thank you very much... Did you actually make this for me, Mitsuki?"

"W-What, what makes you think that?"

The fork fell from Mitsuki's hand. Unable to hide her shaken heart, she asked me.

"Lisa mentioned it. She said you make lovely sweets, so I wondered whether this was your creation too."

"U-Umm..."

"Judging from your reaction, I guess I'm right?"

"...Yes."

Mitsuki huddled herself and admitted in a small voice.

"Then why not say that from the start? I am very grateful to you."

"Because... It would be very embarrassing if it failed to suit your tastes, Nii-san. Also, I would not hear an honest opinion."

Mitsuki looked away and said with her face red.

"Sheesh... I thought you'd grown braver after becoming the student body president, but you're still so timid on weird issues."

Laughing wryly, I scooped a spoonful of the dessert and tasted it. The gentle and sweet flavor immediately started spreading from the tip of my tongue.

"—Mmm, super good."

"R-Really?"

"Yeah, and the entire schools students have already recognized your skills, right? I think you could be more confident."

"If the person before me says it does not taste good, the opinion of the majority will be completely meaningless."

Mitsuki asserted with a serious expression.

"...I think I'm starting to understand why you're able to become the student body president."

Exhaling in exclamation, I finished all of the dessert.

"—Thanks for the treat. Dessert was lovely. Thank you, Mitsuki."

"Great, you are welcome."

At this moment, the expression on Mitsuki's face reminded of three years ago—that extremely natural and incomparably relaxed smile.

After the meal, I returned to my room to find the lamp on my portable terminal flashing.

Looking at it, I found an email from Iris. This portable terminal was capable of voice calls and email, but the only contacts I had so far were limited to Mituski and Iris .

'I'm waiting for you at the beach.'

That was all she wrote.

I looked at the time displayed on the edge of the portable terminal's screen.

"7:27pm huh... Curfew starts at 8pm so I guess it's fine.
"

Taking the portable terminal, I left the room, walking while writing an email to Mitsuki.

'I'm going out for a bit. Back by 8pm.'

Because Mitsuki would probably check the dorm's entry and exit records, I thought I had better inform her.

I left the dorm and walked on the road along the shore
.

Without any basis at all, I felt that she was probably waiting for me at the place where we first met. Because time was limited, I quickened my pace to hurry on my way.

Countless stars were twinkling in the deep-blue night sky. Waves kept surging and retreating, as though caressing the white beach, playing a regular song of the sea.

My intuition was apparently correct. Iris was standing at the place where our eyes first met. Although she was

in uniform, she had taken off her shoes and stockings to go barefoot.

With the waves breaking over the snow-white complexion of those beautiful feet, Iris was staring at the sea surface afar.

I walked over the sand to approach her, resulting in rustling footsteps. Hearing my footsteps, Iris turned her head in my direction.

"Oh... Mononobe, you came."

"Yeah, because your email said you're waiting for me."

I stopped several meters in front of Iris and replied.

"Sorry for calling you out at this hour. Did Mitsuki-chan get angry?"

"I'm supposed to be able to go out before 8pm... But she might be angry when I get back."

"Fufu, because Mitsuki-chan is very strict!"

Seeing Iris' smile, I felt my heart pounding. Bathed under starlight, the silver-haired girl was giving off an even more otherworldly sense of beauty than usual.

"...Then why did you want to see me?"

I asked her while being aware of the nervousness in my voice.

"Oh, umm, first is, umm... I want to thank you, Mononobe."

"If it's thanks, you already thanked me countless times after the test. It's more than enough. Besides, I didn't do anything that needs you to thank me like that."

"You're wrong! If it weren't for you, Mononobe, I definitely would have failed again, so—Thank you!"

Iris bowed her head forcefully to thank me, her long silver hair spreading out in the air.

"I simply trained together with you... Fine, you're welcome."

Further refusal would just be a waste of time, so I candidly accepted her thanks.

"U-Umm, then... I've got something to ask you, Mononobe... Can I?"

Iris looked up stiffly and asked in trepidation.

"I don't mind..."

I nodded and Iris approached me.

"Mononobe, why did you help me?"

"Huh?"

"Being so considerate of me, working hard with me seriously, Mononobe, you're the first person to do that. Everyone else in the class hold themselves and others to strict standards, so I can't rely on them... Although Mitsuki-chan looks after me frequently, I think that's because she's the student body president."

Iris approached me even closer, almost to the point of touching me.

"So, I wanna know... how you feel, Mononobe."

Seeing her gaze at me from so close, I felt my heart beat even faster.

"T-That's because..."

"Because...?"

"Probably because... you're very similar to how Mitsuki was in the past."

I said one of the reasons.

The debt I felt on my own was just my personal feelings after all. If I had to explain it to her, that meant bringing up things from my NIFL days, so I was not going to say much on that front.

"I'm similar to Mitsuki-chan? No way, I'm completely unlike Mitsuki-chan!"

"She used to have similarities with you, Iris, and right now, she is still working as hard as she can, just like you, so... I think that's why I can't leave you to your own devices."

Hearing my answer, Iris looked down and murmured quietly.

"I see... So that's the case, it's a bit unfortunate. But... it's fine, I just have to start trying hard now."

"Iris?"

I called to her because I could not hear her clearly. Iris instantly looked up forcefully.

"Mononobe!"

"W-What?"

"Listen here, I... want to get closer to you, Mononobe, s-so umm... If you don't mind, I want to be frie—"

WOOOOOOOOOOOO...

Just as Iris was speaking, a loud siren was suddenly heard all around.

'Emergency warning, emergency warning—Level C alert, Type White. I repeat, Level C alert, Type White!'

The announcement explained the key points of the warning.

"Type White—that's 'White' Leviathan, right...? Is a Level C alert very urgent?"

I asked but Iris did not seem like she heard me.

"Leviathan..."

She said the dragon's name with a stiff expression.

Right—Iris had lost her family due to a dragon disaster caused by Leviathan.

'The Counter-Dragon Squad, students selected by the Midgard Defense Department, please man your stations. Prepare to standby for combat operations. All other students and staff, please return to your quarters or the nearest evacuation shelter, especially those currently at shore areas, please evacuate as quickly as possible.'

"Hey, the announcer is telling us to evacuate!"

"...That dragon... is nearby..."

"Pull yourself together! Anyway, we need to get out of here first!"

Iris was in a trance. I grabbed her hand and pulled up up to the breakwater.

A deep noise and vibrations could be felt underfoot.

Looking out at sea, giant rectangular objects surfaced one after another from the originally peaceful sea. Then these objects formed a circle as though surrounding this island.

The displaced seawater formed big waves, rushing up the beach. Smashing against the breakwater, the waves broke into white spray.

"Could that be... Midgardsormr?"

"That's right. What's visible from here is just part of the final defensive line... The first to third defensive lines are farther out at sea."

Probably returning to her senses finally, Iris answered me calmly.

"Iris, you're okay now?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Sorry for spacing out... We have to hurry and find shelter or else we'll cause other people trouble."

After speaking with a serious face, Iris put on the shoes she had placed on the breakwater before hand, then looked up into the night sky.

Uniformed girls holding weapons were passing overhead, flying towards the sea.

This was probably the Counter-Dragon Squad selected by Midgard Defense Department. By generating wind, they were flying in the sky at high speed.

"That's true, we'll only get in their way if we stay here."

"Right, let's head back to the dorms immediately—Ooh ..."

Iris was just about to break into a run when she suddenly knelt down with her hand on her stomach.

"Hey... What happened to you!?"

"A-A sudden stomach ache... Ahaha, maybe I ate too much to celebrate passing the test... Oh... It's gradually getting better..."

Despite the cold sweat already appearing on her forehead, Iris still stood up.

"...Can you walk?"

"No problem... Let's run, Mononobe!"

It seemed to be a momentary stomach ache. Iris took my hand and began to walk briskly.

Iris had to make her way to the shared dormitories located near the school so we separated along the way and I returned to Mitsuki's personal dorm.

"Mitsuki, are you here?"

I called out from the entrance hall, but no one answered. Mitsuki was apparently the Counter-Dragon Squad's captain, so she had probably mobilized already.

Although I was curious about the situation outside, I could not ask her through email because it would obstruct her work. Hence, I decided to wait quietly and returned to my room.

Unable to settle down, I started wanting to find a book to read. The instant I touched the portable terminal, a ringtone was suddenly heard.

I initially thought it was Mitsuki, but the screen did not display the caller's number. No matter how long I waited, the ringing showed no signs of stopping, so I hesitantly pressed the button to take the call.

Immediately, an image with static appeared on the screen to show a young man in military uniform, grinning.

That smile made me feel a chill from the bottom of my heart.

'Hi, it's been a while, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe.'

"Major Loki... Why—"

I uttered his name in a hoarse voice.

Major Loki Jotunheim—The person who used to be my direct superior until recently.

This man, who could be considered the mastermind behind NIFL, why—

'Well, I wanted to call you earlier... But Midgardsormr's defensive line includes many barriers on electronic communications too. If it weren't for the current battle situation, communicating without Midgard's knowledge would be impossible. Sorry for calling late.'

"Calling late... I wasn't waiting for a call from a guy like you—"

'A guy? In just a brief week, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe , have you forgotten how to address your former commanding officer?'

Narrow eyes stared straight at me from the screen. Just by doing that, he made me feel like I was pulled back to the past, pulled back to those long, dark days when I was working under him.

"...My apologies, Major Loki."

'Now that's more like it. Still, I can hardly blame you for growing lax. Compared to NIFL, Midgard is like paradise. It's only inevitable that you would be affected, given your *incompleteness*. Seriously... It is truly unfortunate that I couldn't *finish you up* in the end."

"You called me... Why?"

'Oh right, I almost went on a tangent. It's like this, I have a favor to ask of you.'

"A favor?"

'Our positions no longer allow me to command you, so this is a favor. 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe, you already know that Ds can turn into dragons, right? This is top secret at NIFL but it should be something that all Midgard students are privy to.'

Smiling artificially, Major Loki asked me.

"...Yes, if a D makes contact with a dragon after her dragon mark changes color, she will turn into the same type of dragon. Are you referring to this phenomenon?"

'Indeed, how terrifying. To think that such monsters could multiply, a most frightful notion chilling to the bone. An outcome that must be prevented at all costs, do you not agree?'

"Y-Yes... Of course."

Despite a foreboding feeling, I still concurred.

'But despite its crucial position, Midgard has not perfected its handling of this matter. After confirming that a dragon mark had changed in color, they send the subject to an underground bunker for isolation, then have other Ds intercept the dragon. This is the tactic they have chosen.'

"That kind of tactic... What's wrong with it?"

'Are you playing dumb? It should be quite clear to you . The most effective countermeasure is to kill the D whose dragon mark has changed in color.'

The chill given off from Major Loki's inexorably cold eyes almost seemed to freeze my heart.

"...No one can support that, whether on grounds of human rights or the social value of Ds. One D's death is a massive loss to the world."

Besides, who would be capable of making that kind of proposal?

Despite the threat of dragons, the world continued to develop slowly, maintaining some measure of peace. It was all thanks to these Ds bolstering energy resources.

'But I believe that the economic and human losses arising from an increase in dragons would dwarf the benefits. But just as you say, it is true that such a method won't be supported by the majority. Because the world fears offending the Ds while the Ds won't abandon one of their own. After all, any one of them could be the next victim.'

"Then—"

'Hence, someone needs to act in secret.'

Major Loki interrupted me, his eyes fixed upon me.

"You're not ordering me, by any chance?"

'Not an order. I am simply asking you to accept the mission as a favor to me. Your reassignment to Midgard was completely unexpected, but I already had prior plans to have someone infiltrate. If you could take on this mission, it saves a lot of work. Don't worry, all you need to do is kill one D if an emergency arises.'

"Please don't... make it sound so easy."

I gritted my teeth and glared at Major Loki.

'It is very easy, at least to the 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe I cultivated. Whether Ds or anyone else, as long as the opponent is human, you won't lose, because you are the strongest Fafnir from our Sleipnir."

"..."

I could not say anything. Major Loki's words were just a curse, not praise.

'You don't have to answer immediately. But if your assistance cannot be secured, I might have to resort to less efficient means, which might cause unnecessary collateral damage. So please consider the matter carefully .'

Zzzt. The call disconnected and the screen went black.

Leaning myself against the back of the chair, I looked up at the ceiling.

The siren still continued to blare.

Part 3

The alert of an approaching dragon was finally lifted about three hours later.

But late night arrived and Mitsuki still did not return. The next time I saw her was already the full-school assembly the next morning.

"I believe that everyone should know already that at 7:41pm last night, there was a Level C alert situation. The approaching dragon is 'White' Leviathan that circles the Pacific Ocean along a fixed route. But this time, it has deviated from that route to trespass Midgard's warning zone."

Standing on the podium, Mitsuki explained the situation. This was probably part of the student body president's job.

"Leviathan stayed roughly three hours in the warning zone but returned to its original route without reaching the first defensive line. These irregular exceptions seem to occur once in a while. A year ago, a passenger ship was sunk due to this reason."

A year ago... Ship... Would that be the dragon disaster that Iris had been caught up in?

Looking at silver hair, I wondered to myself. Since students were lined up according to their Student No., Iris was in front of me.

Iris did not react to what Mitsuki had just said. With her hand on her stomach, perhaps that stomach ache from yesterday was still persisting.

"If Leviathan attacks, it will be quite an arduous battle. Leviathan is considered second only to 'Yellow' Hraesvelgr in how troublesome they are to handle. Wielding the power of universal repulsion known as antigravity, Leviathan presents a great challenge, be it approaching or attacking its body. However—"

Mitsuki leaned forward and slowly swept her gaze over all the students of the school.

"Even if one of you were to attract Leviathan, causing it to attack, the Counter-Dragon Squad will still fight fearlessly. We will not abandon you no matter what.

Consequently, if any of you feel that your dragon mark has changed, please do not hesitate. Step forward and let us know. I will put my life on the line to protect you."

Mitsuki declared clearly. Strong conviction could be felt from her words. It was not simply a sense of obligation.

Thunderous applause started up.

However, Iris did not clap even though she had felt moved by Mitsuki's previous speech. Her slender shoulders were shivering while she had her head lowered.

"Eh, where's Iris?"

After the assembly, I returned to the classroom to find Iris missing.

"Who knows? She was apparently feeling unwell, so she probably went to the infirmary, right?"

Lisa's gaze met mine while she answered with displeasure.

"Oh, you also noticed Iris didn't look her usual self, Lisa?"

"Of course. Rather, you seem quite concerned about about Iris-san. You wouldn't be harboring ulterior motives, would you?"

Lisa gazed at me with eyes of suspicion.

"Just like you, Lisa, I'm simply worried about her."

"What... I-I am not—"

At a loss for words, Lisa looked away.

Just at this moment, Mitsuki entered the classroom. I decided to ask her about Iris' whereabouts.

"Iris is missing. Did you hear anything, Mitsuki?"

"No, I have not..."

If Iris had gone to the infirmary, she should have asked me or Mitsuki to tell the teacher. My heart began to grow inexplicably uneasy.

"I'll go look for her. Tell the teacher for me, okay?"

"Hey wait, Nii-san!"

Leaving behind Mitsuki who called me frantically, I entered the corridor. Next period was about to begin and there were almost no students out in the hallways.

I made my way quickly to the infirmary first. I knew where to go because I brought Iris there last time when she fainted from the explosion. Reaching the adjacent building, I went to the corner of the first floor and opened the door marked "Infirmary," but Iris was not there.

"Sheesh... Where did she go?"

Did her stomach ache hurt so much that she could not move? I tried searching along the path to the gym but still could not find her.

"Maybe... in a washroom?"

If she was in a washroom, there was nothing I could do. It was also possible that my worries were unnecessary. I decided to return to the classroom first so I turned back from the gym.

There was a corridor linking the gym and the school building. From there I could see tropical flowers blooming in the courtyard. Just as I shifted my gaze upwards, I suddenly discovered a figure on the school building's roof.

"What...?"

A strong breeze was blowing beautiful silver hair. The girl was quietly staring at the ground below.

Seeing her like that, I instantly felt the surge of an ominous feeling. Immediately, I sprinted.

Dashing into the school building, I rushed up the stairs and smashed myself against the door to reach the roof.

The loud crash caused the silver-haired girl, leaning against the roof railing, to look back.

"Mononobe?"

"Sure enough, it's you, Iris..."

Iris's eyes were wide open. Looking at her, I sighed. When I saw her just now, for just an instant, I thought she was going to jump, but I suppose I was worrying too much.

"Why did you come here?"

"I want to ask you the same question. It's almost class time, you know?"

"I... will skip next period."

Iris smiled wryly and sat down on the concrete. Her hand was still pressed against her stomach.

"What exactly is the matter?"

"I need time to calm down."

On closer examination, what Iris was holding was her flank. I recalled her nude body and its snow-white complexion that I saw by chance the first time we met. Speaking of which, her dragon mark happened to be near that spot—

"...Iris, do you have a stomach ache?"

"..."

"If you don't mind, could you show me where you're hurting?"

"Mononobe, you're so perverted."

Iris huddled her body and glared at me.

"Oh, no, you misunderstand me."

I was trying to find an excuse when Iris chuckled then exhaled gravely.

"—I know. Sorry for saying something malicious like this."

Iris pulled up her uniform to expose her abdomen.

My heart instantly raced like mad. My gaze getting drawn to Iris' skin was admittedly one of the reasons, but the bigger reason was surprise. The dragon mark branded on Iris' flank was shining with faint silver-white light.

"That... Starting when—"

"I only discovered it this morning, but I think it already started changing last night."

Iris spoke in monotone.

"You still haven't told anyone?"

"...I haven't."

Iris nodded with a gloomy expression.

"Why? Mitsuki said she absolutely won't abandon anyone. She'll put her life on the line to protect you!"

"That's why I didn't confess. 'White' Leviathan is one of the dragons which have no effective countermeasures for, but if for my sake... if everyone has to fight for the sake of protecting someone like me, is it really okay...?"

Iris gazed out into the distance on the other side of the railing.

"No way—Are you planning to jump off the building to commit suicide before the situation reaches that point?
"

I grabbed Iris' shoulder and pulled her back, because I feared what she might do if I did not hold her tightly.

But Iris smiled wryly and shook her head.

"I thought of that too... But I'm too scared, can't do it. I'm not a girl with that kind of mental strength."

"...Thank goodness you're a coward, Iris."

"Jeez, what do you mean by that!?"

Iris pouted.

"Even if you kill yourself now, it's possible that another D might get targeted soon enough. That wouldn't accomplish anything except postponing the problem. Unless the dragon is defeated, it doesn't solve the problem at the root."

—The most effective countermeasure is to kill the D whose dragon mark has changed in color.

Major Loki's words flashed through my mind.

It definitely could resolve a crisis momentarily. In terms of preventing the worst-case scenario, this might be the safest method. However, if this were to be repeated, all the Ds would go extinct eventually.

"Yeah... I know that too but even so, I'm still afraid."

"You don't believe in Mitsuki and the others?"

"That's not it... I'm afraid of the fact that I won't be able to kill myself. Once the final defensive line is breached, when we really are out of options... Unable to commit suicide, I'll surely become a dragon. In that event, I'll harm everyone! I don't want that... Anything but that..."

Irisi hugged me, speaking words from the heart. Precisely because she felt such a strong sense of duty towards fighting dragons, she was this scared of becoming a dragon disaster herself.

—Someone needs to act in secret.

Major Loki's voice sounded deep in my ear again.

No matter what, the world could not run normally unless someone did the dirty work. It felt very paradoxical, but it was the truth.

The people of Midgard were not stupid. Despite what she said, Mitsuki had probably prepared a last resort to use for emergencies.

If that was the case, there should not a problem with me taking on that job. At the same time, I could also restrain Major Loki, to prevent him from unnecessarily interfering.

"Don't worry, Iris, you absolutely won't turn into a dragon."

I committed my determination and hugged Iris tightly.

"Eh...?"

Indeed, now was the time to return my debt.

Iris had proven my obstinacy, telling me that even if I had to weigh my own life against it, I was still capable of choosing not to kill.

That time, because I was facing Iris, that was probably why I managed to regain self-control.

Because I was attracted to her beauty in the instant of our encounter, that was why I could regard her as just a girl instead of a D.

It made me feel that I would rather die than kill her.

Hence—

"If the situation worsens so much that we're out of options, I will do it—I will kill you, Iris."

I made my choice by my own will again.

If it was for Iris' sake, I will kill Iris.

I will put the obstinacy, which I had adhered to for the past three years, on the line.

To this date, I had avoid tainting my hands, but it was only for the sake of guarding my heart.

Iris' wish of not wanting to harm others was far more noble than mine.

And I wanted to help her achieve her wish.

"Mononobe, you...?"

"Yes, so you can relax and let Mitsuki's team protect you for now. Until the final moment arrives, I absolutely won't give up either."

I gently stroked her soft, silver hair and replied. Iris looked up with moistened eyes at me.

"Can I... believe you?"

"Leave it to me. Although I've kept quiet about it so far , I'm actually the world's strongest assassin—The candidate for that."

Hearing me say that, Iris was stunned for a moment before her lips curled lightly to smile.

"Fufu—You must be kidding!"

After that, I accompanied Iris back to the classroom and explained the situation to Mitsuki.

Then Mitsuki immediately declared a Level A alert state of emergency.

Part 4

On this liberating island in the south with beautiful weather, the atmosphere and scenery changed dramatically. The windows in buildings had shutters lowered to defend against shockwaves. Normally kept underground, anti-air weapon stations popped out all over the island.

The concentric defense system of Midgardsormr had entered interception mode completely. Its intimidating formation had the entire horizon covered.

In contrast, the school disappeared. The school building and the clock tower, where the most important facilities were located, were all hidden underground, sealed inside partitions made of mithril.

Entering school premises required passing through underground passages connected to the various dormitories and emergency. It was only today that I finally learned that Mitsuki's personal dorm also had an entrance to an underground passage.

"So late..."

I was sitting on the stairwell at the entrance hall, staring at the ajar door in the wall beside me, leading to the underground passage.

It was currently 2am. I would normally be asleep so my eyelids felt very heavy.

I could hear faint sounds of airplanes outside. These were probably reconnaissance planes patrolling in Midgard's surroundings.

While I was half asleep, the door leading underground opened on its own with an electronic sound.

"Welcome back, Mitsuki."

I called to my sister whose face showed exhaustion.

"...!? N-Nii-san? Please do not startle me. Have you not gone to bed?"

Staring at me, Mistuki seemed seriously surprised.

"I was waiting for you, Mitsuki. Are preparations complete to intercept Leviathan?"

After I asked, Mitsuki replied with seriousness returned to her face:

"Although it is not perfect by any stretch... Leviathan has entered its route circling the Pacific Ocean. It is expected to approach again thirty-three hours from now. Before that, we should be able to reach full readiness."

Thirty-three hours later...

I repeated it silently in mind in order to commit this information to memory. Then I asked another question:

"So... How's Iris?"

"She had been receiving body checkups and diagnoses until just now. After all, she is the first person to have her dragon mark change color in the past two years, so there is a dearth of information. Being targeted by a dragon is very terrifying, but Iris-san has been cooperating with us without panicking at all."

It was most likely because Iris had already resolved herself. If that was the case, I had better keep my promise .

"Mitsuki, what should I do?"

"Nii-san... because you only passed as a reserve member in the Basilisk drill, you will not be summoned for the Counter-Dragon Squad. Presumably, you will be asked to stay on standby in shelter like ordinary students ."

Nothing to do, in other words? In that case, perfect.

"If that's the case... Can you assign a job for me, who has nothing to do?"

"A job?"

"Yes, as Iris' bodyguard."

I made this demand which I would have found it impossible to bring up in the classroom with everyone present.

Mitsuki frowned in surprise.

"The Counter-Dragon Squad is fighting to protect Iris-san. Your participation is not needed, Nii-san."

"That's against dragons as opponents, right? By bodyguard, I mean protecting Iris from threats other than dragons."

Hearing what I said, Mitsuki's expression instantly froze. She seemed to understand immediately.

"You are saying... that someone might target Iris-san's life?"

"At least NIFL doesn't trust Midgard. They might interfere unnecessarily."

Mituski narrowed her eyes after hearing what I said.

"Judging from your tone, Nii-san, you seem to have some kind of concrete evidence?"

"Yesterday, my commanding officer at NIFL, Major Loki, contacted me."

"What..."

Mitsuki gasped in surprise.

"The Major has apparently made up his mind to prevent an increase in dragons. Just by assigning me as Iris' bodyguard, NIFL will be reassured to some extent."

"In other words, at a critical moment, Nii-san, they will have you kill Iris-san?"

Mitsuki stared at me with eyes of determination.

"Yes, *but that critical moment will be decided by me*. Until then, I will not allow anyone to kill Iris, no one at all."

I took on Mitsuki's gaze directly and answered her that way.

"...Your description makes yourself sound like the grim reaper, Nii-san."

"Yeah... But in a certain sense, that's precisely my *original job*. Mitsuki, you're probably aware given your position, right? Although I was never deployed in an actual operation of that sort... The reason why Sleipnir, the team I used to be part of, was established, its real purpose was to target Ds who've been deemed as disasters, to assass—"

"Enough!"

Mitsuki cried out loudly to interrupt me.

"...Please say no more. I wish to hear none of that from your own mouth especially. Nii-san, please remain the Nii-san I know."

With tears glimmering in her eyes, Mitsuki pleaded to me.

"Mitsuki..."

"Regarding the bodyguard matter... I permit your request, because it seems to be the only way right now to keep NIFL restrained, but I have one condition."

"Condition?"

Seeing Mitsuki's gloomy eyes, I asked uneasily.

"If the situation reaches the point when Iris-san's dragonification is truly unavoidable—I shall do it then."

"What... No way! I can't let you do that kind of thing, Mitsuki!"

I yelled frantically but Mitsuki smiled wearily and shook her head.

"—It is fine, because my hands are already tainted."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Two years ago, the one who killed the fellow D who had turned into a dragon... That was me."

After saying that, Mitsuki walked past me and swiftly went up the stairs.

By the time I regained my senses from the shock and looked back, Mitsuki was already out of sight—

'—Really, you will accept this mission? That's really great help for me. And to think you've already secured the job as bodyguard to the target, you really work fast. I'm so fortunate to have such an outstanding subordinate like you. Ahhh, but you're not my subordinate anymore.'

Hahaha, Major Loki laughed superficially. Ignoring him, I continued.

"Anyway, because of that, please don't interfere anymore. I will definitely accomplish the mission."

'Very well, I understand. I will not do anything to obstruct you. Well then—I trust you, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe.'

Zzzzt, the call disconnected.

"There is no one least suited to speaking the word ' trust' than you."

Muttering sardonically to myself, I laid myself on the bed.

After the conversation with Mitsuki ended, i returned to my room to get ready for bed, but as though aiming for this opportunity, Major Loki called at this time.

Because I already decided there was a need to contact him again, this timing turned out just right, except it felt a little terrifying.

"I can't lower my guard..."

Looking up at the ceiling, I spoke.

Mitsuki's words were also occupying my mind the whole time.

Just like I had gone through great changes over the past three years, Mitsuki must have experienced a lot.

Although no matter what things had happened, no matter what sins she was shouldering, I had no intention of handing Iris over to Mitsuki.

I had said to Iris: Leave it to me.

And three years ago, I had also said to Mitsuki: Leave everything to me.

I will not break... that promise.

Part 5

The next day, I went to school through the underground passage from the dormitory.

That being said, given the current emergency, lessons were naturally suspended at school. Walking through quiet and deserted hallways, I took the elevator and pressed the button at the bottom.

After experiencing the long descent, I finally reached the shelter that was located even deeper than training site number three. In front of a door in the corridor ahead , I could see a blonde girl standing there.

"It seems it's true that you will be in charge of monitoring Iris-san."

The girl—Lisa—looked at me with disdain.

"I'm not monitoring her, just a bodyguard. Have you accompanied Iris all this time since yesterday?"

My question prompted Lisa to puff out her chest and nod.

"Because we are classmates. When a classmate is in need, extending a helping hand is only natural."

"I see, you are considerate for your friends after all, Lisa."

"W-What do you mean by after all!? What do you know about me anyway!?"

Lisa glared at me with her face red.

"We've spoken so many times, it's only natural I'll gain a certain level of understanding. Right now, you're staying by her side because you're worried about Iris, right?"

"...For people like us who are living outside, separated from parents, classmates are equivalent to family. How could I not worry about her?"

Lisa shifted her gaze away, murmuring her answer quietly.

"Since you care about her so much, why not treat her more gently day to day...? Iris is always hard on herself for being called a poorly performing student."

Lisa whimpered "ooh..." then shook her head forcefully as though pulling herself together before glaring at me again.

"T-Those known as older sisters often act strict towards their younger sisters! Only family members can speak their minds without reservation, right?"

Her allegation made me think inside.

Indeed, gentle treatment was not the only expression of love and care. Iris was probably able to work so hard because someone existed to point out her flaws mercilessly.

"...I guess. Perhaps it's better if you continue with what you're doing, Lisa. Now that I think about it, you're quite an excellent older sister."

"Y-You will not gain anything from flattering me!"

Perhaps out of embarrassment, Lisa was speaking in a shrill voice.

"I'm not looking to gain anything either."

I shook my head wryly.

"That better be the case. Oh, just for the record, I still have not acknowledge you as a member of the class, so familial affection does not apply to you. Please do not forget that."

"—Got it. Anyway, I'll take your place from now on. You haven't slept since yesterday, right? It's best that you rest in preparation for battle."

Hearing me, Lisa made a displeased look.

"I will do that without needing you to tell me. Frankly speaking, although you do not reassure me, you do get along with her the best. I suppose Iris-san will have an easier time staying calm with you by her side."

After saying that, Lisa left towards the elevator.

But I suddenly remembered something and called to her.

"—Lisa, do you know about the Kraken battle two years ago?"

"Of course I do. I was fighting on the frontlines then."

Lisa stopped before the elevator and answered without looking back.

"The one who defeated Kraken was... Mitsuki, right?"

"Yes, indeed. Mitsuki-san shot and killed two Krakens. Through her accomplishments from that time, she rose to her current position."

I felt that Lisa's tone of voice had become stiff.

"It sounds like you don't approve?"

"—I approved because there was no other choice back then. But emotions are a separate matter. I cannot forgive Mitsuki-san who has murdered family."

"Family...?"

"Oh dear, so your knowledge is limited. Two years ago , the one who was turned into a dragon was Student No. 4 of Brynhildr Class, Shinomiya Miyako. She was Shinomiya-sensei's younger sister."

Lisa spoke in a calm tone of voice, then entered the elevator. Without looking back, she said:

"Then I shall leave Iris-san in your hands."

The elevator doors then shut. Just as I was stunned on the spot, I heard a door open. The door behind me had opened.

"Mononobe..."

Seeing Iris dressed in a flimsy nightgown, I instantly felt my heart rate rise.

"I-Iris, you heard everything?"

"Yeah... I was waiting to thank Lisa-san, because she treated me so nicely yesterday, but I couldn't find a chance to interrupt—"

Scratching her head, Iris smiled wryly.

"You already knew about what we mentioned just now ?"

"I've only heard others talk about it, because I only came to Midgard a year ago... By then, Mitsuki-chan was already the student body president."

"I see now... But let's put that aside. If you just got out of bed, get changed first. Otherwise, I won't know where to look."

The fabric of Iris' nightgown was very sheer and offered faint glimpses of her body's curves.

"...It's a bit embarrassing, but I'm okay with it if it's you , Mononobe. Don't mind it. Come in."

"You're asking me not to mind—Hey, hold on!?"

Iris grabbed my arm and pulled me into the room. The interior was bigger than I imagined. Because it was a shelter, I originally thought it would be more plain, but it felt no different from the dormitory rooms.

Inside the room was a very comfortable looking bed, a desk with a breakfast tray on it, and a large closet. There was also a door that seemed to lead to the toilet and bathroom.

There were no windows after all, but instead, there was a large monitor installed on the wall. The screen was divided into multiple screens, displaying the situation around Midgard.

"Come, Mononobe, sit down here."

Iris plopped herself on the bed and patted the spot next to her.

"...Sit there?"

"Yes."

Iris nodded with a serious expression, so I nervously sat down beside her.

Then Iris leaned herself against me and hugged my arm.

I could feel my arm surrounded by a soft sensation.

"H-Hey?"

"—Let me stay like this for a while. There will be more tests starting noon again, so let me lean against you until then..."

Hearing the words Iris squeezed out desperately, I exhaled. Although Mitsuki had mentioned earlier that Iris had cooperated calmly, she would still feel afraid and uneasy, right?

If doing this could give her a bit of strength, then I'll let her lean like this for now without making a fuss.

To prevent my imagination from getting carried away, I turned my attention to the island scenery shown on the screens.

One view seemed to be taken by a satellite from above. It showed Midgardsormr surrounding the island in four

layers. Many ships could be seen outside of the first defensive line. Those were probably NIFL's battleships and carriers.

Other images showed the girls of the Counter-Dragon Squad, patrolling the island's airspace. Firill, Ren and Ariella could be seen among them.

"Oh!"

Seeing something inappropriate, I could not help but cry out.

"You saw... Firill's panties, didn't you?"

Perhaps following my gaze to see the same view, Iris remarked quietly.

"N-No, but it's an image shown on screen, so it can't be helped. Rather, it's weird to be flying in the air while wearing a skirt, right?"

"Sure enough, guys are happy to see panties, right?"

Iris looked up at me and asked.

"What...? No way... how could that be possible!?"

"Ah, you looked away! Sure enough, you enjoy it, right ?"

Iris leaned against me even more, forcing her gaze to meet mine.

"Doesn't the way you put it make me out to be a pervert!? Rather than enjoy, it's just a feeling of slightly profiting."

"Meaning that... You enjoy it a lot?"

"Urgh..."

Under her cold gaze, I could not speak for a while.

Staring at me like that for a while, Iris then asked in a barely audible voice:

"...Mononobe, will you be happy to see my panties too ?"

"W-What are you saying so suddenly—"

Ignoring my panic, Iris continued with a blush:

"If you like it, Mononobe, I could show you? Because I've always wanted to... thank you."

Saying that, Iris lifted the hem of her nightgown.

My gaze was uncontrollably drawn to her.

Eh? Hey, hold on—

I gasped. My heart raced. I subconsciously gulped.

The hem was gradually lifted. I could not tear my eyes off that gradually exposed snow-white skin.

Iris' fingers trembled lightly. With her face bright red, she pulled the nightgown's hem even higher.

Her thighs, looking so soft and seductive, kept shaking my rationality. Finally, her nightgown was lifted up to near the base of the thigh.

Any further lifting and I would really see—

"Y-You don't need to thank me like that!"

Coming to my senses at the last second, I held Iris' hand down.

"Mononobe... You don't want to see mine?"

Iris was asking with a displeased look.

"It's not a matter of whether I want to see or not. What I mean is you shouldn't do something like that so lightly. Man are far dangerous creatures than you can imagine, Iris."

"...I am not doing this lightly. I had to gather a lot of courage to speak my mind."

"That's even worse. You have to treasure yourself more ."

Perhaps Iris simply wanted to show me, but that would awaken even stronger desire. If I were to lose to desire, I would be sent to a tribunal meeting. But enduring on, refusing to succumb to desire was also quite painful. If following either path led to hell, then turning back would be the correct decision.

"Oooh, Mononobe, you're so malicious."

"I didn't say that because I'm malicious..."

I scratched my head, out of ideas. Right now, I was mustering all my effort to suppress my impulse. I was not confident I could withstand further stimulation.

I turned my attention back to the monitor, but things would be bad if I saw something I should not again, so I fixed my gaze on the screen that displayed the sea.

"I clearly wanted to reward you, Mononobe..."

Iris was murmuring in her lips, leaning her body against me. Through the sheer fabric, her body warmth was transmitting to me distinctly.

I looked for conversation topics to change the subject.

"I-Iris, what's that one screen that's showing the sea surface? The image seems to be moving, so it's not a fixed camera right—"

I rapidly asked Iris but her face instantly became shrouded in gloom.

"Oh... That seems to be the one monitoring Leviathan. Because the dragon can't be seen deep in the sea, it's right there—under the seawater."

I realized I had changed the subject to something bad.

"...Sorry, I made you feel worse."

"No. It's okay, because by doing this, I'll cheer up soon enough."

Smiling, Iris hugged my arm even tighter—

Just as Iris mentioned, when it was almost noon, a school nurse arrived.

Iris had changed into her school uniform. I accompanied her to the examination room but since I could not go in after all, I stood outside the door, waiting for the examination to end.

This was originally the first floor of the school building , but since it was now underground, all the windows were covered by metal shutters.

Because I had nothing to do, I generated some dark matter and practiced altering its form to pass time.

"I knew it, I'm still not used to guns weighing this light ..."

I sighed and crushed the dark matter in Siegfried's form inside my hand. Then I heard footsteps approaching.

Someone was walking from the other end of the corridor. With long flowing hair, head raised, chest out, walking in a very prim and proper manner, she was—

"Mitsuki."

As soon as I called out to her, Mitsuki instantly stopped. This was our first time meeting since last night. I recalled what Lisa had said about what happened two years ago.

"Nii-san..."

"You need me for something?"

"...Yes, although I actually wish to avoid broaching this topic."

Mitsuki nodded with a gloomy expression.

"It's best to get unpleasant things over with quickly, right?"

I urged her by using a tone of levity.

"Good point... Well then, I have several questions for you, Nii-san. Did you use your full ability during the test last time?"

"Of course I did, Mitsuki. You saw during my training, right? You should know that's my limit."

Hearing my answer, Mitsuki continued to ask:

"So, according to your methods... Nii-san, without using fictional armaments, can you easily crush that block of diamond?"

"...No, I think I already demonstrated in the first training session. My method is to use an anti-materiel rifle and that's the most effective means."

I knew roughly what Mitsuki wanted to ask about.

So I prepared myself and waited for her to ask.

"Well then... Three years ago, Nii-san, how did you repel Hekatonkheir? Can you no longer accomplish the same thing?"

"..."

Finally. Ever since my reunion with Mitsuki, I expected to be asked this question eventually.

That day, I challenged "Blue" Hekatonkheir in order to defend the town—

"If possible, I have no wish to dig up what happened then. I would like to keep that incident buried in my heart too. You would probably be forced into an even more awkward position if that incident came to light. Because what you did that time was so unusual, a miracle so unbelievable, Nii-san, but..."

Mitsuki continued with a leader-like expression.

"As captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad, I must maintain a grasp on all currently available combat potential. If incorrectly used or managed, strong powers have the potential to hurt oneself instead. I am very afraid, unsure of what you might do next, Nii-san, so—"

"I understand... I'll answer you honestly."

Because Mitsuki looked extremely sad, I interrupted her and nodded.

"...Sorry, Nii-san."

"No need to apologize, you're just doing what you have to do as the captain. About your question just now, my answer is no. Currently, I'm unable to singlehandedly repeat what happened three years ago."

"Unable to singlehandedly... Is that so? I see now. I can probably imagine the usage condition required back then ."

Mistuski said with a somewhat enlightened expression .

"That's so fast. But even if that condition is fulfilled, I probably still can't defeat Leviathan. That's what my power is like."

Three years ago, I ultimately failed to kill Hekatonkheir. Despite the heavy price I paid, it was still beyond me.

Precisely because of that, I found Mitsuki to be an extremely dazzling sight. Because destroying a dragon was a power that I could never possess, no matter how many more heavy prices I paid, I would still be inferior to Mitsuki.

"...I understand now. You have said enough."

Mitsuki exhaled lightly and nodded. Then she gazed into my eyes.

"If I raised your hopes up... I'm sorry. But even if I can't defeat a dragon, I might be able to help in some way. Because that power needs a stable footing, it can't be used from the air or on a ship. Because of that, even if I can participate in attacking, I think it'll have to be near the final defensive line—"

"No, there is no need, Nii-san, you only need to focus on protecting Iris-san. My goal was to ask you to avoid using that power as much as you can if concealing it was your original intention."

Mitsuki's response greatly surprised me. I thought she was hoping my power could defeat Leviathan.

"If I used my power... will something bad happen?"

"Yes, if I remember correctly, three years ago, Nii-san, what you used was a firearm-like weapon. If that type of weapon were to be used carelessly, not only will it fail to defeat Leviathan... Worse comes to worst, it might end up deflecting back."

"Deflecting back?"

"...You will understand once the battle begins. Please watch the screens in the shelter carefully."

Mitsuki turned her back to me after speaking.

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, because I still have a pile of work to do."

"I see... Don't strain yourself too much."

I actually wanted to ask about the girl named Shinomiya Miyako, but I could not bear adding more to Mitsuki's mental burden, so I swallowed my words.

"This I cannot agree. If I do not strain myself now, when else? I have promised to everyone at the full-school assembly—I will put my life on the line."

Rather than a sense of mission, her expression seemed to carry resolve of a more heavier nature. After saying this, she headed down a dark corridor to leave on the other side.

Unable to say another word, I could only see her off, watching that slender back that was shouldering so much.

"Ah, so tired..."

After the tests, Iris came to my side and stretched.

"Good work. Let's go back to the shelter for dinner."

Iris naturally put her arm around mine. While trying my best not to think about her body warmth, I walked over towards the elevator.

Then at the school building's entrance hall on the first floor, we met familiar faces.

"...Oh!"

The one who exclaimed softly was Firill. Ren and Ariella were by her side too.

Ariella raised her hand and spoke to us.

"You came at the right time. Because it's break time, we were thinking of heading to the shelter."

"To the shelter? Why?"

Hearing my question, Ariella frowned.

"What's so strange about visiting a classmate to see how she's doing?"

Next to her, Ren nodded frequently to concur, her red hair swaying.

"No, it's not weird at all. Sorry, I asked a pointless question."

Lisa had said that fellow classmates were equivalent to family. Ariella and the others seem to be holding the same sentiment.

Firill then approached Iris and peered at her face.

"...You look very exhausted. Are you doing okay?"

"Y-Yeah, I"m fine. It's just that the testing dragged on for too long, I'm hungry."

Iris answered with a nervous expression. She was probably unused to being treated so gently.

"...Really? Then please take this."

Firill handed a small bag of something to Iris. Accepting it, Iris opened it and immediately showed excitement on her face.

"Wow, it's chocolate!"

"...This is the chocolate I bought overseas through the internet, not too long ago."

"Eh? Then isn't it expensive?"

Hearing Iris, Firill nodded.

"Yes, but you can have it."

"...Thank you, Firill-chan."

Iris thanked her with tears in her eyes then Ren and Ariella also presented small gifts from the side.

Ren's was candy while Ariella's seemed to be cookies.

"Umm... Is it really okay for me to have this?"

Iris accepted them in trepidation and asked them.

"Mm."

Ren kept nodding with an expression that seemed to say "of course you can."

"I feel bad that I can only do this kind of thing for you, but tomorrow, I will fight my hardest to protect you."

Ariella spoke with a serious expression.

"Ren-san, Ariella-san... Thank you."

Iris was finally moved to tears.

"...Don't cry."

Firill passed her handkerchief to Iris.

Seeing that handkerchief, Iris found it even harder to stop her tears.

After a while, Iris finally stopped crying and everyone waved and took their leave. Watching their backs as I saw them off, I said:

"They're really great classmates."

"...Yeah."

"Mononobe, the bathwater is ready! Let's take a bath together!"

That night, after eating dinner and the snacks from Firill and the others, Iris regained her cheerfulness and suddenly announced.

The shelter instantly fell into a brief silence, because it took me a while to understand what Iris was saying.

"...I refuse."

I exhaled greatly. Evidently, Iris had completely failed to understand what I said this morning.

"You refuse to protect me in the bathroom? I'll be afraid if I'm alone..."

"Urgh..."

Seeing her show a worried look, I felt a bit guilty, but this was a line I could not compromise.

"...I'll be in the room. Just hang in there for now."

"Aww... Fine, then let's bathe separately. Mononobe, you go first. Since we're staying in the same room, I hope you'll wash yourself very clean."

Looking slightly displeased, Iris urged me to to take a bath.

"I don't mind going first, but why me first?"

"Because if I let you go after me, you'll lick the tub I used and drink the water I washed with, right? After all, that still would make me feel... embarrassed."

"Like hell I'd do that! Are you still looking at me in that way...?"

Hearing her say that, I walked to the bathroom, feeling hurt. Taking off my uniform, I entered the bathroom naked. The tub was already filled with hot water.

I sat down on a bathing stool then poured warm water over my head. At this moment, I sensed someone's presence in the changing area's direction.

"No way..."

I had a bad feeling. Looking up, I saw a white figure behind the frosted glass.

Before I could stop her, the door slid open and Iris entered, wrapped in a towel.

"M-Mononobe! I came to help you scrub your back! It's because I still wanna repay you—"

Her slightly nervous voice was cut off mid-sentence. Seeing my completely exposed naked body, Iris had her mouth opening and closing inexplicably—

"Kyahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Covering her eyes, she screamed.

"Don't go barging in without permission then scream! You've reversed our positions!"

I hastily covered up my crotch with a towel while grumbling at her.

"B-But... But..."

Her face bright red, Iris peeked at me through the gaps between her fingers.

Fidgeting awkwardly, she was rubbing her snow-white thighs together, exposed under her bath towel. That was too stimulating a sight. I hastily shifted my gaze away.

"Okay, hurry and leave. I'll shower then come out straight away."

As much as I wanted to drive her out by force, the towel I brought in was not enough to wrap around my waist, making it impossible for me to stand up.

"N-No way... I can't give up because of something like this."

Clenching her dainty fist in front of her chest, Iris shook her head.

Then mustering extraordinary willpower, she circled over to my back with stiff footsteps, then froze at this moment.

"Hey... Mononobe."

"W-What?"

I answered nervously.

"Back scrubbing... How do I scrub?"

"You... You wanted to help me scrub without knowing how?"

I asked in exasperation.

"I only heard that this kind of custom exists in Japan... I don't actually know the details. Do I just pour hot water over you?"

"Pour hot water, then use a soaped towel to scrub... I think that covers it."

"Eh!? I didn't bring additional towels! M-Must I untie this one?"

Iris was just about to untie the towel wrapped around her body.

"No need to untie! Just use your hands directly if you don't have a towel—No wait, you don't need to do this at all, now that I think about it. Get out now!"

"No need to be shy, Mononobe, because I'm not forcing myself to do something I dislike."

Saying that, Iris rubbed her hands together to make the soap lather, then started washing my back.

"Woah!?"

Feeling someone else's touch on my back was more ticklish than I imagined.

"Fufu—Mononobe, you shuddered."

Initially a bit inexperienced, she gradually grew bold. Because she seemed like she was not going to give up no matter what, I decided to indulge Iris until she was satisfied.

"Monobe, your back... is so wide."

"..."

Iris' little hands, which were scrubbing my back, made me realize again the fact that she was a *girl*.

To be honest, it did not feel unpleasant at all, but... Suppressing instincts continuously was extremely taxing for the mind. When I promised Mitsuki I was not going to engage in inappropriate interactions between genders, I never expected this kind of predicament at all.

Rather, this could be considered "inappropriate" already, right?

Although such a thought crossed my mind, I still told myself that it should still count barely within bounds.

"It's not very visible under clothing, but your muscles are quite firm. It's unexpected."

"...Well, that's because I went through training in the army."

"Is that why? ...Training must be tough, rigt?"

"Yeah, I almost died."

"Thank goodness you didn't die, Mononobe."

Hearing Iris' almost nonsensical response, I could not help but smile wryly.

"What are you smiling for?"

"...It's just a bit ticklish."

"Oh, then I'll wash the front next."

Perhaps deciding that the back was washed enough, Iris circled around to my front.

"Hey, that's no good! Iris, you came to scrub my back, right? In that case, I don't need you to wash the front!"

"Consider it a freebie! A freebie! Don't be shy, Mononobe."

Iris smiled at me innocently.

"I'm not being shy... W-Washing the front yourself is part of manners!"

"Manners? It's true, I definitely haven't heard anything about a custom of washing the front..."

"That's right, the back is the only part you can entrust to others. You've heard of the saying, 'letting others cover your back,' right?"

"Y-Yeah... But it feels like you're using twisted logic..."

Iris looked up at my face from below. The cleavage visible from her bath towel was shaking my sanity.

If I allowed her wash my front in these circumstances, an irreversible situation was going to develop.

I desperately persuaded Iris, finally convincing her with much difficulty.

However, there were even harsher trials awaiting me that night.

"Mononobe... Let's sleep together tonight."

Seeing Iris invite me to bed while dressed in a sexy nightgown, I felt my consciousness leave me for an instant.

"Tonight... might be my very last, so to me, this may or may not be my final remaining time... I don't want to spend it alone."

—That was such an unfair way of putting it. How could I possibly ignore her?

But even so, I desperately tried to resist.

"Can't you ask someone else? For example, if it's Lisa—"

"I prefer you, Mononobe, I don't want anyone else! This is my request of a lifetime!"

"How can you make unreasonable demands like a child...?"

"I don't care if it's an unreasonable demand! If my life is ending tomorrow, then it's too much of a waste if I don't use up my request of a lifetime now!"

I realized what Iris was trying to convey really was "a request of a lifetime" literally.

"Why... are you choosing someone like me?"

Unable to comprehend this, I asked her.

"—Because you've treated me with kindness."

"Huh?"

"Because you've treated me with the most kindness, Mononobe. You're the first person to extend a helping hand to me. If you must ask for a reason, that's pretty much all I can answer. Is this kind of reason... not enough ?"

Seeing her ask me with tears in her eyes, I could not help but take a few steps back.

"No... Nothing like that—"

"Please, I beg you, Mononobe, even if it's just lending me your back for me to lean against, aren't backs for entrusting to others?"

To think she was bringing up the excuse I had used in the bathroom, I had no choice but to surrender.

"...I got it. If showing my back to you is fine, I'll stay with you, Iris, until you fall asleep."

I prepared myself, climbed onto the bed and lay down with my back facing her.

"Thank you... Mononobe."

Iris leaned herself against me and whispered in my ear . The softness and warmth I was feeling against my back was making my consciousness boil.

Surrounded by sweet fragrance, my rationality was almost flying away. Despite the fact that we were both clearly clothed, it felt even more dangerous than in the bathroom.

"So this is your scent, Mononobe... I knew it, the real thing is better..."

Iris pressed her face against my clothing, murmuring to herself.

"...Real thing?"

"Eh? N-Nothing, d-don't mind me."

Behind me, Iris was especially flustered.

"Speaking of which, the shirt I lent you the first time we met... What happened to it?"

"Frightened!?"

"...I've never heard anyone yell 'frightened' as an exclamation before."

I smiled wryly as I spoke.

"N-No! I didn't take the shirt to sniff it, to hug against my bosom, or use it as sleepwear!"

Iris argued in quick succession to defend herself.

"...I never knew you were that perverted."

"I said I didn't do it! If you must have it back, I'll return it next time. I'll even give you special permission to sniff and lick it out of my sight."

"Like hell anyone's gonna do that! Besides, that was mine to begin with. I don't have any weird fetish of getting aroused from my own clothing that someone else had worn! Returning the shirt is only going to cause me a headache. You can have it as a gift!"

Although it was no big deal, I had no desire of wearing something that I had no idea what had been done to it.

"...Thank you! Sure enough, you're so kind, Mononobe. "

"Uh, if you say I'm kind for something like this, you'll only give me a headache..."

Because what I said totally did not stem from kindness , I had no idea how to react.

"No, Mononobe... You're very kind... Extremely kind."

Saying that, Iris leaned even tighter against me. Two soft sensations could be felt pressing against my back more strongly.

"I-Iris, it's touching me! It's touching!"

Although accusing her like this did not feel proper, at this rate, my rationality really was going to reach a limit, which was why I yelled at her.

"Yeah... I know"

But Iris remained unfazed. Quietly, she spoke:

"Mononobe, there are three ways to prevent a D from turning into a dragon. The first is to defeat the dragon. The second is death. And the third is... to stop being a D."

"That's—"

I recalled the conditions Mitsuki had mentioned about Ds losing their power. Instantly, my heart rate jumped.

"That's right... Reaching twenty years old or so, or getting pregnant, that's how we become ordinary people, so—"

Iris whispered softly in my ear.

"S-So...?"

"..."

I asked her but Iris did not answer.

She simply pressed her fiery hot body tightly against me.

The sound of heartbeats seemed to be pulsating next to my ear. My mind went blank.

In this quiet room, all we could hear was each other's breathing.

Unable to say anything or do anything, I could only let time pass like this.

My sanity was getting worn away bit by bit.

But just as I was about to reach my limit, Iris laughed from behind.

"Sorry—Saying it that way was a bit underhanded just now."

"Huh?"

"...Actually, even if Ds get pregnant, their power weakens gradually rather than losing it all at once. It takes roughly three months for a D to lose her power completely, so it's too late once you're targeted by a dragon."

"Don't say such things that'll make others misunderstand..."

I almost lost control because of that.

"Fufu, Mononobe... Your heart was beating so fast just now, because I had my ear against your back, I heard it clearly."

"...I heard your heartbeat too, Iris."

"Ehhh! No way!?"

Iris began to panic behind me.

"If you're leaning so close, of course I'll hear you. Also, if you're going to play pranks like earlier, I'm going to sleep on the floor or outside."

"Oh... S-Sorry! Mononobe, please don't go!"

Iris grabbed me desperately.

"H-Hey!"

"I'm not going to play a prank... I just wanna say... If you really want to do that, Mononobe... But halfway through, I felt afraid again."

"Oh come on... Maybe you're trying to repay me again, but that's going way too far. If an accident happened, you might lose the power to fight dragons, you know?"

Iris felt a strong sense of duty towards the matter of fighting dragons. She trained desperately to hone her power for the test. I did not want her to give up on that power so easily.

"But... If I die tomorrow, it doesn't matter..."

"Rather than thinking about the case of dying, it's more constructive if you think about the case of surviving."

"That doesn't sound like something coming from the one who promised to kill me, you know...?"

Iris spoke in a tone of disagreement.

"Yeah, on the one-in-ten-thousand chance of that happening, I will kill you before you turn into a dragon. But you've got to try thinking about the rest of the ten thousand, right?"

"The rest of the ten thousand?"

Iris did not seem to understand, so I continued:

"Suppose the total is ten thousand, after taking out that one chance, there are nine thousand nine hundred and ninety remaining, in other words, that many futures where I won't have to kill you, Iris."

"You're just playing word games."

Iris disagreed quietly.

"Really? I think that's how high the chances are. Mitsuki, with her accomplishment of having defeated dragons, is also standing on our side. You should put a bit of faith in my little sister at least."

I said cheerfully without looking back. Although half of what I said was bluffing, the remainder was serious.

I could feel Iris' arm relaxing, followed by a tiny laugh.

"Fufu—How unbelievable. After hearing that from you ... Mononobe, I'm beginning to feel that perhaps you might be right."

"In that case, sleep earlier tonight. This is for the sake of tomorrow—and beyond."

I felt her nod in agreement.

"...Yeah, goodnight, Mononobe."

"Okay, goodnight—Iris."

Soon after I responded, I could hear the breathing from her sleeping soundly. Perhaps she had been unable to sleep the previous night.

Because Iris was still clinging to me tightly, I could not even get out of bed quietly.

Despite acting cool earlier, I was still bothered by the warmth and suppleness of Iris' body. It was impossible to sleep at all.

Fighting a protracted war of resistance from then on, I only fell asleep just as dawn approached.

Chapter 4 - Roaring Fafnir

Part 1

"Stay away... Stay away..."

Mitsuki pleaded while her tiny shoulders shook.

She pleaded to the blue giant approaching from afar, the "Blue" Hekatonkheir that was trampling houses, roads, trees, cars, flattening everything underfoot.

And all I could do was watch. Even weaker than Mitsuki, I was unable to do anything.

I wanted power, the power to make Mitsuki's wish come true, the power to eliminate all hardship, the power to pummel that thing which was making Mitsuki sad!

—Neun, demand, confirm—

At this moment, I heard an emotionless voice in my mind. Crack, I saw a tiny sapling, breaking through the asphalt surface of the road to emerge.

—Circuits of omniscience, partial release, consider, aligned interests, proposal, make a deal—

What? Who the heck are you?

Fragmented words poured into my mind directly. The originally intermittent voice gradually gained fluency.

—I, am, Gaia's oldest, dragon species, Thue. Known as Kiskanu according to Acht, or *Yggdrasil*—

"What..."

I could not help but exclaim quietly in surprise.

Seven extraordinary organisms had suddenly appeared on Earth. According to announcements, they were monsters called dragons, the same type as what were recorded in legends. And one of them matched the name the voice just told me.

Could this be... the green dragon, "Green" Yggdrasil?

I looked downwards at the tiny sapling and felt myself shuddering.

What's going on? Is this real?

I had never heard of dragons being able to converse with humans. More importantly, whether dragons possessed that level of intellect was still unknown.

For days on end, the television had been broadcasting news about dragon disasters. They also saw dragons as monsters impossible to communicate with.

—Again, confirmation, demand consideration, make a deal with me—

A deal...? Speaking of which, I had said the same thing earlier.

What the heck are you offering me? And what price do I have to pay?

—Offer is, power. Demand is, extermination—

Extermination? Extermination of what...?

—All dragon species, apart from myself—

What...? Aren't you on the same side? You're a dragon like them, right?

—No, we are different beings. They are guardians whose missions have ended, living on without purpose, existences causing harm, existences who have outlived their usefulness, what the planet seeks is Neun—

Guardians? Harm? Neun?

Because it was too sudden, I could not even understand half of what it had said.

What I got the basic gist was only that Yggdrasil regarded other dragons as enemies. If Hekatonkheir was called our common enemy, then our interests were definitely aligned.

...Will I really obtain power if I made a deal with this thing?

Power capable of driving away that giant—

While I was lost in deep thought, the blue monster continued to lumber towards our town.

"Stay away—!!"

Mitsuki fired a full-powered strike with a scream.

Although her attack gouged a massive hole in Hekatonkheir's body, the wound recovered instantly.

No good. Hekatonkheir was immortal. No matter what damage was inflicted, it was pointless.

"...!"

Even so, Mitsuki still confronted the giant bravely.

"Mitsuki... You just don't give up, do you?"

I said calmly to her.

"How can I possibly... give up?"

Mitsuki answered in a hoarse voice.

"Why? Father and Mother have evacuated already. Everyone else has fled long ago. There's nothing left that needs to be protected at all costs like this—"

"There is! This place has our home! That town is where we were able to become family!!"

Mitsuki yelled, interrupting me.

"...Okay, I see now."

I exhaled lightly and placed my hand on Mitsuki's head.

"Nii-san?"

"Here on—Leave *everything* to me."

I made my decision.

—I want power. I agree to the deal!

I spoke as loudly as I could in my mind.

No matter who it was, no matter what kind of price, I cared not.

So long as it could change the fate of the town that was about to disappear, it would be enough.

—Acknowledged, connecting—

What flowed into me then was a power completely different from what I originally envisioned. With no

energy included at all, it was a power that was unable to take effect independently.

It was a vast amount of information regarding power that used to exist in the past.

And at the same time, I lost many things, losing things I needed as Mononobe Yuu.

Hence, I was no longer Mononobe Yuu.

Starting from that point, I had become *something* different.

Part 2

WOOOOOOOOOOOO...

I woke up to the siren blaring. Then I immediately saw Iris' face appear before my eyes.

"Uh..."

Seeing Iris sound asleep at a distance where we could feel each other's breathing, I instantly became wide awake.

I should have had my back towards her, but unknowingly, I had turned around in my sleep somehow .

Fortunately, she was no longer clinging to me, so I left Iris and got off the bed.

Inside the room where the lights were still switched off , only the monitor glowed brightly.

The siren was not coming from the monitor but the speakers for communications.

This was a warning that Leviathan had approached the alert zone in the waters.

On screen, the battle was finally beginning.

Just outside Midgardsormr, NIFL's battleships were blocking Leviathan's path. A giant silhouette could be seen in the sea. It looked like it was swimming at a shallower depth compared to yesterday.

Pillars of water rose in its surroundings.

"Torpedoes...?"

Attacks were apparently starting at last.

In the next instant, a hole opened up in the sea.

It was Leviathan's ability—Antigravity. The power to push away and reject everything.

Pushed away, the seawater formed giant waves, striking and sinking many ships.

Judging from the fact that the ships appeared to be pea-sized in comparison, that hole's diameter reached almost ten kilometers. Then a giant creature surfaced from that hole.

"That's... 'White' Leviathan."

Despite having seen it on photographs before, upon seeing a live video feed like now, I could not help but feel shocked by that overwhelming presence.

The screen had switched to an angle as though the camera was on a ship. Using an antigravity field to float into the air, Leviathan's impressive body was being filmed from below. It was so gigantic that it could not fit inside the screen. The surrounding ships looked almost like toys.

According to the speculation of scientists, this dragon might be mutated from a blue whale.

Indeed, with front flippers, tail fins and an air hole on its back, it shared the same characteristics as marine mammals. However, it definitely did not look like the same type of creature.

Covered all over by a white outer shell, it had a giant horn on its head and rows of sharp teeth like a carnivorous predator, not something one could still consider the same species as the blue whale.

The fleet could be seen firing anti-air guns and surface-to-air missiles, but no matter what was fired, they all stopped in midair before being repelled.

Struck directly by missiles that were sent back, the ships exploded and scattered.

—I finally realized what Mitsuki meant by deflecting back.

Looking at the half-wrecked fleet, I began to think at the same time.

If one wanted to breach the repulsive field using projectiles, the only way would be to break through using massive momentum. Since the enemy's ability was already understood, NIFL must have used high-speed shells as much as possible, but to end up with this outcome... It was probably because they had yet to find out the maximum output of Leviathan's repulsive field, right?

"Did lots of people just die in the attack?

I heard a trembling voice behind me. I looked back to see Iris staring at the monitor, having just woken up.

"...It's probably okay. Because the NIFL battleships attacking on the frontlines are almost all unmanned ships controlled remotely through cloud systems."

Anti-dragon battles were essentially battles where sacrifice was inevitable. Hence, NIFL would always send out unmanned fighter jets and fleets. Hopefully, there were no human losses.

At this moment, what appeared from the satellite view was a red marker. The marker was approaching Leviathan at high speed.

"An ICBM—"

Assuming this was a weapon under NIFL's jurisdiction , I had a pretty good idea what it was.

The anti-dragon ICBM, Gáe Bolg, named after the spear used by a Celtic mythological hero, was their latest weapon. Tipped with mithril, it was able to pierce any dragon's skin to cause an explosion inside.

Of all the weapons whose development I participated in, this was supposed to be the most effective.

This was the manner in which I made effective use of the power I had obtained from my deal with Yggdrasil. And now, it was time for it to show results.

Gáe Bolg would use multiple boosters to accelerate during its descent to reach a final speed beyond Mach 40. It was most likely the fastest projectile weapon on Earth.

The strongest spear created by mankind was about to strike Leviathan from the air.

The video image instantly distorted while a violent explosion turned the screen white.

After a slight delay, nearby screens also turned into white images.

"What's the outcome...?"

Iris asked with worry.

"No idea. As long as it hits, any dragon should not be able to come out unscathed but—"

Even after the bright light faded, the screen was still shrouded in smoke, showing nothing.

But after a while when the smoke had dissipated, the giant white body swam out from the smoke.

The repulsive field pushed smoke away while Leviathan emerged completely unharmed.

"Why is it fine despite such a strong explosion?"

Iris groaned with disbelief.

"Whether the missile or the explosion, they were probably pushed back by the repulsive field. Judging

from the aftermath with smoke everywhere, the repulsive field contracted momentarily. Just a bit more, and it could have reached the dragon's body."

Ultimately, using my power was still not enough.

Leviathan moved past NIFL's fleet to approach Midgardsormr's first defensive line.

Spread in a circle, 20m-tall cube-shaped units deployed round lens openings.

Immediately, dozens of bright light beams shot at Leviathan.

"This time... Tactical high-energy lasers."

As a laser weapon, delivery was near lightspeed, far surpassing that of Gáe Bolg, striking the instant it was shot. However, the lasers were distorted unnaturally in front of Leviathan and ended up flying past the dragon.

"M-Mononobe! What happened this time?"

Iris got off the bed, crouched down next to me and asked.

"By my guess, it probably used the repulsive field to warp space, how troublesome... It seems to adjust countermeasures depending on the situation. It probably judged the lasers as unblockable."

I had also participated in the development of tactical high-energy lasers.

Because my only friend at NIFL was in the technological development department, I would often visit during my training breaks, *passing my knowledge* to him discreetly.

One could say that NIFL's technology was raised by many levels using the *knowledge of power* I had received from Yggdrasil.

However... This weapon was not enough to defeat a dragon either.

"Ahhh... It's breaching the first defensive line."

Iris sighed with disappointment.

"No, the plan is apparently to let it pass. The Counter-Dragon Squad is already waiting at the second defensive line."

I pointed to another screen.

In the air above the laser units, the girls were wielding their respective weapons. Lisa was in the center of the group. With her fictional armament raised—Gungnir—she said something.

Immediately, the units of the first and second defensive lines all fired lasers simultaneously.

This was a saturation attack executed from two fronts. Using spatial distortion as evasive measures would not be able to handle attacks coming from all directions.

A number of lasers struck Leviathan, causing damage for the first time. Scorching, slicing through its outer shell , the lasers left numerous burns on the surface.

However, the target was far too massive. Perhaps it was not even enough to inflict pain. Although Leviathan was injured to some extent, it still continued to advance unfazed.

Then with Lisa in the lead, the Counter-Dragon Squad attacked.

The defense offered by spatial distortion had reached a limit. Leviathan could no longer handle all attacks. A thick beam of light released by Lisa pierced Leviathan's left flipper.

At this moment, the white monster bared its sharp teeth, reacting for the first time.

"..."

Next to me, Iris suddenly clutched her flank.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"...This is bad, it's angry... Everyone, run away—"

Through the nightgown's sheer fabric, I could see the dragon mark glowing intensely.

Around Leviathan's giant horn, the surrounding scenery became distorted.

Then Leviathan opened its massive jaws. Although I could not hear any sound from the video feed, I knew the dragon was roaring.

The sea—It split apart.

Everything along Leviathan's route of advance was sent flying away. Giant laser units broke and scattered, falling into the surrounding sea.

Originally in formation, the Counter-Dragon Squad was also scattered in disarray.

BOOM—A low vibration also reached the shelter where we were.

Looking at the satellite view, let alone the second defensive line, even the third and final defensive lines had collapsed in some parts.

It had probably deployed a repulsive field in front of itself then shot it like a cannonball.

"This is... quite bad."

I remarked bitterly.

The attack just now clearly showed the gap in power between humans and dragons.

The Counter-Dragon Squad gathered and attacked again. Leviathan was still quite far from Midgard.

Lisa's face was seen for an instant on the screen, showing no signs of giving up.

However, if one were to draw early conclusions based on the battle so far—

Just as I was thinking that, the shelter's speakers could be heard.

'Student No. 8 of Brynhildr Class, Mononobe Yuu—Please hurry to the command center in the clock tower. I repeat—'

Iris looked at me in surprise.

"Mononobe, they're calling for you?"

"Yeah... That's right."

An ominous feeling turned into certainty. My fears had evidently turned into reality.

"What's with you? Why are you making such a scary face...?"

"Iris, put on your uniform quickly and come to the command center with me."

I instructed her swiftly. There was probably not much time left.

"Eh? I thought I'm not supposed to leave the shelter...?
"

"Ignore that, hurry! If you stay here any longer—You might be killed!"

Part 3

Holding Iris' hand, I ran along the corridor.

In any case, I must acquire a correct grasp of the situation first. I only hope that a certain person was not the enemy, but—

"Mononobe! Explain to me properly!"

"There's no time. Just put up with it and follow me!"

I yelled forcefully in agitation. Iris went red in the face for some reason.

"...Yes."

Iris replied politely and nodded.

Bringing Iris who had suddenly become obedient, I arrived at the clock tower. Since it was currently underground, the clock was not visible but the building had other functions.

The clock tower was currently used as the Counter-Dragon Squad's command center.

I placed my student ID on the panel sensor in front of the command center. Probably because I was not authorized for entry, the door did not open automatically , but instead, Shinomiya-sensei's voice spoke.

'—Mononobe Yuu?'

"Yes, I was called here."

'I only summoned you. Why did you bring her along?'

My taking Iris out of the shelter seemed to have been discovered already.

"Because I believe that Iris will be at risk if she's left alone in the shelter."

'...'

Getting silence as the response, I concluded that my premonition was correct.

"—I would like to have a word with you, Shinomiya-sensei, could you please come out?"

I said that and waited for a while. Then the command center's door opened and Shinomiya-sensei walked out. With dark circles under her eyes, she probably had not slept.

"I don't have time. Please make it brief."

Shinomiya-sensei had her arms crossed before her chest while she looked at me and Iris next to me.

"Iris, cover your ears for now."

"Eh? Why?"

Iris widened her eyes in surprise. With a solemn expression, I said:

"Because I think it's best that you don't listen to this."

"...Got it."

Iris obediently covered her ears with her hands. After making sure she had done so, I exchanged gazes with Shinomiya-sensei.

"I'll ask directly. Shinomiya-sensei, did you accept NIFL's request?"

"...What are you talking about?"

After pausing for a while, that was what Shinomiya-sensei asked in return.

"I'm guessing the other side probably issued a one-sided notice that they will deploy troops to prevent the worst-case scenario, right? Deciding it was impossible to stop them, Shinomiya-sensei, to avoid unnecessary sacrifices, you tried to separate me from Iris. .. Am I wrong?"

"—Looks like there is no point for me to cover it up any further."

Shinomiya shook her head with a solemn expression then said:

"Indeed... I decided not to stop NIFL's action but I did not agree completely with their demands either. My

additional condition was that they are forbidden to make a move before the final defensive line is breached. They would have taken forceful measures if I refused their demands outright. With that, we would have no chance of winning because we are not trained in anti-personnel combat. Hence, this is the barely acceptable compromise. "

Shinomiya-sensei explained her reasons in a forceful voice.

"At the critical moment, you intend to let NIFL stain their hands, right?"

"...If someone has to do it, that would be a feasible option. Already... I don't want Mononobe Mitsuki to bear another cross."

Shinomiya-sensei lowered her head, nodding with a somber expression. Her voice seemed to carry heavy emotions.

"Bearing a cross—you mean the matter of your younger sister?"

I asked directly.

"...So you know. Indeed, turned into a Kraken, my younger sister was killed by Mononobe Mitsuki. I ordered her to do so."

Shinomiya-sensei looked up and answered with a commander's face.

"What... It was your order? Why—"

"Because I was the Counter-Dragon Squad's captain at the time and only Mononobe Mitsuki's antimatter projectile could defeat the Kraken."

Shinomiya-sensei spoke without changing expression. I could not read the emotions in the dark depths of her eyes.

Although I had heard during class that there was only one D who could create antimatter, I never expected it would be Mitsuki.

"...Mononobe Mitsuki followed my orders without saying a word. By her own hand, she killed her best friend. And this time, she intends to do the deed again. But if such a heavy burden were to be imposed upon her again... Her mind won't withstand it."

Best friend... This was my first time hearing that Shinomiya Miyako and Mitsuki had that kind of relationship.

"—Shinomiya-sensei, you accepted NIFL's request for Mitsuki's sake as well as to delay killing Iris immediately , right?"

"Although I absolutely do not consider that the best decision."

Shinomiya-sensei nodded bitterly.

"No... It's enough as long as it's not the worst. Anyway , I'm relieved that you don't seem like you're in a hurry to get rid of Iris."

"I used to be a D even though I've lost my powers. I won't treat any of my juniors lightly, no matter whom."

Shinomiya-sensei spoke in a strong and powerful tone of voice.

"I get it. Then just leave the rest to me."

"What?"

Hearing what I said, Shinomiya-sensei frowned.

"I'll drive away those interfering guys from the army. Letting Iris die as a human was the mission I accepted, so I don't intend to let anyone else have it."

"You'll drive away the army? Don't be ridiculous, what can you do as one person?"

"As long as the opponents are humans, there is nothing I can't do."

I simply said the truth. As for what expression was on my face at the time, I had no idea, but an expression of fear did flash across Shinomiya-sensei's face.

"...You..."

"An ambush is best set up as early as possible. Shinomiya-sensei, please tell me the army's route of invasion."

Iris and I were running together along an underground passage in Midgard.

"Hey Mononobe! We're heading out to defeat the people coming to kill me, is that really true?"

"Yes, the team sent by the enemy is very likely Sleipnir , the special forces under my former commanding officer Major Loki's direct command. I'm gonna drive them all away."

Although there was no concrete evidence, this possibility was the most likely seeing as a D was the target.

"Is it really okay... for me to come along?"

"That's actually the safest way. As long as you stay at my side, Iris, I won't let you die—until the moment I decided to kill you."

"Ooh... You're not allowed to say something like that!"

"Huh? Something like what?"

"What I mean is stop saying such cool things!"

Iris yelled with her face red.

The passage's wall was marked "A-6." Shinomiya-sensei said she opened this passage to the army.

I had memorized Midgard's map for the most part. Suppose the harbor and the beach were considered the front of the island, then this passage should be leading to the cliffs and rocky shore on the back of the island.

That direction happened to be nearer to the side where the final defensive line was partially damaged from Leviathan's attack.

NIFL probably intended to invade through the damaged parts of Midgardsormr. If the final defensive line had remained intact, trying to enter Midgard without permission would have been impossible even for an elite team.

There was a flight of stairs ahead in the passage. Humid wind caressed our cheeks. The partition wall for the ground level entrance had apparently been opened.

"Iris, starting now, keep walking 2m behind me."

"...Okay."

Originally following me closely, Iris did as told and kept a bit of distance.

"Hoo..."

I exhaled greatly, gradually switching away from the consciousness that had grown lax from school life.

Anti-personnel weapon—AT Nergal.

Using the dark matter extracted by my right hand to perform transmutation, I formed my familiar gun.

Holding the grip, I approached the stairs. In front of the stairs, a rectangular blue sky could be seen.

"—"

I rushed to the top of the stairs in one breath then peered at the situation outside.

There was a vast open space outside, roughly twenty meters in radius, with tropical plants growing all around, blocking visibility farther ahead. However, faint sounds of waves could be heard, so the sea should be quite close.

"Mononobe...?"

Iris climbed up the stairs, panting heavily as she called out my name.

"Don't worry, Iris, just stay there quietly and don't move. I'll take care of them soon."

I stroked Iris' beautiful hair gently then walked to the ground.

Although invisible, there were people present.

Focusing my concentration, I keenly sensed other people's gazes.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. This was murderous intent that I had forgotten for a while now.

Vision, hearing, touch. These senses gradually became clear.

As though waking up from sweet slumber, the world was gradually dyed by the vivid color of danger.

Now that I think back, when I first arrived at this island, my mood felt as though I was having a dream.

That feeling was correct. I had been sleeping, enjoying a happy dream.

But it was impossible to fight in a state of slumber.

Hence, I must wake up briefly from the comfortable dream.

I could not feel fear, because I had already lost the emotion of *fear* three years ago.

Only now, there was no need for me to adhere to Midgard's ways. This was a familiar battlefield for me.

The corners of my lips naturally rose.

The presences numbered one, two, three...

"...Eight people. Just as expected, it's Sleipnir."

Sleipnir was the name of the eight-legged war horse appearing in Norse mythology. NIFL's Sleipnir team was composed of eight members as the legs and one person as the head.

"I can't believe you guys have the gall to steal my prey. Have you prepared yourselves?"

My tone of voice naturally turned violent.

The pressure of a battlefield quietly made me excited.

No answer. Neither did I hear any unnatural sounds.

Just the way it should be. Because among my subordinates, there were no idiots foolish enough to answer these words.

Only murderous intent gradually grew tense. The instant of gunfire—Now was the moment!

I pointed Nergal's muzzle at the jungle and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Zzzzzzap!

"Gah!?"

A scream came from the depths of the jungle, accompanied by a popping sound.

The Nergal was a projectile-based electroshock gun.

It did not simply paralyze the target. As long as it hit, the target was almost guaranteed to faint. Even if they

could wake up immediately, they would still be unable to walk for several hours. Although it was a non-lethal weapon for subduing people, it was quite a dangerous weapon.

While running towards my next prey, I generated dark matter in the magazine, transmuting bullets.

My dark matter generating capacity was far less than other Ds. Although I could not transmute more than ten kilograms of matter, below that—on the level of bullets for example—as long as my stamina permitted, I could create as many times as I wanted.

Nergal's capacity was nine shots, but as long as I was the user, there was no worry of running out of bullets.

—Over there!

I used Nergal to fire consecutively at enemy presences I sensed in the jungle, but I did not get the feeling I had hit anything.

As though chasing after my trail, shots fired from the right scarred the ground.

"Tsk!"

I returned fire to pin down the enemy while jumping into the jungle. Then I charged at the enemy who had evaded Nergal.

I saw a man dressed in camouflage gear, bullet vest, helmet and a mask, trying to fire his submachine gun at point blank range.

—Too slow!

Before the man could shoot, I kicked the submachine gun's front end upwards.

Rat-at-at-at-at—The stream of bullets struck the leaves in the tree.

I charged in front of the man who was exposing an opening, then pulled Nergal's trigger at point blank range.

"Gah..."

The man's entire body convulsed. With eyes rolled up, he fainted.

The other side did not persist in attacking. I took a closer look and saw three Sleipnir members ignoring me

to head towards the entrance to the underground passage.

"—I'm really being underestimated here."

I immediately charged those men.

Clong.

Along my route of advance, a black and round object rolled out..

—A grenade.

"So... what!?"

Anti-explosive armament—Uruk 73E.

Generating dark matter underfoot, I transmuted it into part of the armor plating used by NIFL tanks.

Using guns with infinite ammunition combined with shields created from transmutation, that was my original fighting style. Because Nergal was enough for offense, I essentially used dark matter only for defense and replenishing ammunition.

Siegfried's high firepower technique was not needed against humans.

Boom—The impact and sound of the explosion erupted under the armor plating. Instantly, the world turned upside down.

The grenade's explosion had sent the armor plating into the air with me included.

However, my gaze did not leave the enemy.

While my view was upside down, I fired Nergal consecutively.

Since I was firing from midair, it was impossible to aim precisely, but I managed to hit one of the men. Dropping the gun in his hand, he also collapsed on the ground.

However, the remaining men pointed their muzzles at me while I was still in the air. I could sense five sets of murderous gazes on my body.

There were two mobile enemies in the plaza while the remainder were amidst the trees.

Of the presences in the jungle, one was positioned farther away, most likely a sniper.

Using my low generating capacity to make a shield covering all vectors of enemy attacks would lower the thickness no matter what. Too thin a barrier would get penetrated by rifle bullets.

—In that case, I only needed to defend precisely.

My accelerated consciousness and expanded senses in the battlefield were raised to an even higher level.

Switching modes in my brain, I switched to a certain being that Major Loki wanted to mold me into.

Back then, Major Loki had said:

Your talent is neither the ability to create dark matter as a male, nor making inexplicably appropriate suggestions in weaponry development. Rather—You resemble me greatly.

What he meant by that... I still did not understand, even now.

But that existence, which was gradually constructed inside me, Major Loki called it "Fafnir."

Rat-at-at-at-at—!!

Anti-materiel armor—Damascus 09P.

Multiple gunshots rang out, but I had simultaneously created five small yet thick shields of steel along the firing lines.

The bullets struck the shields exactly as though they were attracted to them.

—Ammunition replenished.

While descending, I reloaded Nergal's bullets using dark matter transmutation.

Then I fired the instant I landed. Of the two men remaining in the open space, I was aiming at the one on the right, but the other guy rushed out and got hit.

"Gah!?"

Grunting in pain, the man collapsed.

With that, only one person remained mobile in the plaza with three in the jungle.

I did not shoot but pointed Nergal's muzzle at the last person remaining in the plaza.

Judging from the way someone took a bullet for him, this guy was most likely the team captain. In that case, I might be able to use him as a hostage.

"Nobody move."

To make sure the three in the jungle heard, I yelled loudly.

"You... monster!"

The man originally wanted to aim his gun at me, but despite cursing the whole time, he stopped his motions. The attacks from the jungle also stopped.

"Hey, is that the way to speak to the former captain... Hmm? Who the heck... are you?"

His face was obscured by the mask, but the voice did not belong to anyone in Sleipnir.

"W-Who the heck are you!? What is your goal!?"

He did not recognize me...?

On further thought, they were too weak, after all.

I took another look. Their equipment was different too. Members of Sleipnir were supposed to be equipped with MP Nergal, but I coudl not see that kind of gun among these guys' equipment.

It looked like they were not the people sent by Major Loki.

Had he kept his promise to me? No... Judging from the number of people, eight, I could feel that this was his doing.

Most likely, he had abstained from action, instead goading someone else to do it. Major Loki was someone who was capable of doing that nonchalantly.

—However, there was meaning for me to accept Major Loki's request.

Had I refused, the team he sent to Midgard would undoubtedly be Sleipnir. With that, winning would not be this easy.

I exhaled and glared at the man who was trembling from anger.

"—Are you fine with this? If you continue to fight, more of your team will be injured, yes? There are currently four people incapacitated and four unscathed as well. If you intend to retreat with your comrades, now ought to be the limit."

"..."

"If anyone else is rendered immobile, that person will have to stay, leaving evidence behind whether dead or alive. Midgard simply decided not to interfere in NIFL's operation but did not grant you permission to come ashore. Are you really fine with letting the outside world know of this?"

"Ku..."

Still glaring at me, the man put down his gun and made a gesture with his hand.

With a rustling from the jungle, men emerged and picked up their teammates. The initial spot where I had shot with Nergal also had someone emerge with a teammate on his back.

"—Retreat."

The man in front of me issued a brief order. Picking up one of his teammates, he also disappeared among the trees.

I stayed on alert until all presences had gone afar.

Amidst the sound of waves, faint engine noises could be heard. They probably used some kind of boat to leave.

"Phew..."

I exhaled and relaxed my body, exiting combat mode, sinking the briefly awakened Fafnir into the depths of the subconscious.

"Iris, it's okay now!"

I yelled and Iris poked her head out from the underground passage entrance.

"I-I'm so glad... Mononobe, you're still alive..."

Iris ran over with tears in her eyes.

"I said I'd be fine."

"B-But... I kept hearing gunshots... I was so scared I didn't dare look out... Whenever I thought you might have been shot... I-I—"

Large droplets of tears flowed out of her eyes.

"...You're such a crybaby."

Despite feigning a look of exasperation, I actually felt slightly relieved. If she had seen me earlier, Iris might not have approached me so naturally now.

"Mononobe... Don't die, okay? Absolutely do not die, okay?"

"Come on, you should be worrying about your own life first. Although NIFL's intervention was prevented, unless Leviathan's is stopped, I'll still have to kill you, Iris."

"Yeah... I know, that's fine too. It's so weird... I'm actually not afraid of being killed."

Saying that, Iris wiped her tears away.

"Mononobe, what's left is observe the battle against Leviathan, right? Then let's return to the shelter."

"—No, returning is useless."

"Eh? Why?"

Iris cocked her head in puzzlement.

"You saw Leviathan's powers, right? No matter how deep underground you hide, all it needs to do is approach the ground above would be easily forced apart, so returning to the shelter will only delay things slightly. Compared to doing that, even though it might bring the time limit forward, I'd like to do what I can do."

Holding Iris' hand, I walked over to the path connected to the plaza. The sound of waves became very near. Soon, we would reach a place with open visibility.

This was on a tall cliff, overlooking the sky and the sea . A line of Midgardsormr's laser units could be seen near the horizon, but a portion was broken from Leviathan's attack.

"Although out of sight, Leviathan is over there. If it breaches the final defensive line, we will intercept it here. "

I pointed towards the other side of the damaged units and spoke.

"Ehhhh!? Just us? That's too difficult..."

"No, from what I saw before, Iris, your attack is the most effective against Leviathan."

"My attack...?"

"That's right, Iris, you're able to generate dark matter at specific locations. Just by creating explosives near the enemy's body, you should be able to do definite damage to it."

Causing explosions inside the enemy's body would be even better, but unfortunately, dark matter was very

unstable prior to transmutation. As soon as it came into contact with matter apart from the person who generated it, the dark matter would vanish.

Just by transmuting it, dark matter could be used to create material for stopping bullets, but when maintained in the state of dark matter, it was so fragile that even collisions with nitrogen and oxygen molecules would gradually wear it away.

Hence, trying to send dark matter into Leviathan's body was impossible.

"Me... fighting Leviathan..."

"Yes, don't hold back and do it. I will also—do everything I can."

Then at this moment, a voice came from above.

"I remember you mentioning that you do not have the power to defeat Leviathan, Nii-san."

"What—Mitsuki?"

I looked up at the sky in surprise, only to see Mitsuki floating in the air. Holding a glowing fictional armament

in the form of an iridescent bow, she was gazing upon us strictly.

I did not feel too surprised when watching from afar or through videos, but it still startled me to see from up close a human hovering in the air like this.

According to what Shinomiya-sensei said in class, flying was possible just by maintaining dark matter in the state of a fictional armament while intermittently transmuting air. Given the lack of dark matter at my disposal, this skill was not possible for me.

"Nii-san, why are you here? The same goes for Iris-san too... Please think about your position."

"S-Sorry, Mitsuki-chan..."

Iris apologized on reflex whereas I placed my hand on her shoulder.

"Iris, you don't need to apologize. This battle concerns your life. You have the right to try your hardest to survive. We will intercept Leviathan here."

Hearing this, Mitsuki's expression grew even more serious.

"Are you... serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. Rather, why are you here, Mitsuki? Weren't you fighting alongside Lisa and the others?"

Hearing me ask that, Mitsuki clenched her fist and answered gravely.

"...The third defensive line has been breached. There is no turning back."

"What...? Mitsuki, you can shoot antimatter, right? Even that move doesn't work?"

The trump card that had defeated "Purple" Kraken in the past was one of my greatest hopes.

But Mitsuki shook her head.

"It does not. Very regrettably, after using laser attacks to bait Leviathan into distorting space, I finally landed one hit with difficulty... But the explosion was repressed by a repulsive field and could not cause serious damage."

"No way..."

My hopes were easily dashed in an instant. I could not find any words to say.

Mitsuki gazed down at me and explained the situation calmly.

"Whether poison that would spread from a single hit or a chain of attacks, Leviathan would slice off parts of its body to neutralize them. It is most likely using multiple repulsive fields to create spatial discontinuities to gouge it own body. Since its body is so humongous, it only results in trivial scratches."

"No other methods... are effective?"

I asked in a hoarse voice.

"Nothing comes to my mind—No. Defeating it through constant accumulation of small wounds is the only way, I think. We are currently attacking using the Counter-Dragon Squad's full force... But chances of making it in time are very low, hence I... returned to prevent the worst-case scenario."

Mitsuki spoke in a depressing tone.

"Hey, you don't mean to say—"

"Indeed... When Leviathan breaches the final defensive line, I shall personally kill Iris-san."

Mitsuki stared at Iris with an expression like she was forcibly holding something in.

And as though trying to block her gaze, I stood in front of Iris.

"Sorry, Mitsuki, Iris has already promised me."

"Nii-san... Did you forget the condition I set out?"

Mitsuki's gaze turned sharp.

"I remember but it's Iris who entrusted her life directly to me. Even if my adorable little sister asks me, I can't hand this job to anyone else."

"A-Adorable!? T-This is not the time for saying weird things! Orders must absolutely be followed! Had you not agreed to this condition, I would not have permitted you to be Iris' bodyguard!"

Despite her blushing, Mitsuki still glared at me solemnly.

"In that case, I'll just have to do my own thing. If you're going to kill Iris, Mitsuki, I'll protect her."

"Stop saying such willful things! This is what I must do! Because my hands are already tainted!"

Mitsuki said the same thing as before but now, I already knew the reason.

"—About Shinomiya Miyako?"

"...!?"

Mitsuki gasped.

"I heard your were best friends."

"..."

Mitsuki bit her lip hard and did not answer. Although it was heartbreaking to see the suffering on Mitsuki's face , I still continued:

"What feelings you had when you killed your friend who had turned into a dragon... To be honest, it's impossible for me to imagine. But... You want to shoulder Iris' matter as well just because you killed that

girl? I can't accept this kind of reason. Don't mix Shinomiya Miyako and Iris together as the same matter!"

Listening to me, Mitsuki gritted her teeth. But finally reaching the limit of her endurance, she spoke up:

"In that case... Who else should do it apart from me? This is the method I cannot accept. More importantly, Nii-san, I do not want you to be the one to kill Iris-san!"

Despite her trembling voice, that was how Mitsuki responded to me.

"I absolutely won't let you do it either, Mitsuki."

"...I have already decided, never to have regrets again like three years ago. I shall not leave anything to you again, Nii-san!"

Mitsuki and I glared at each other.

"...We're saying the same thing."

"Indeed... Viewpoints on parallel lines."

We both realized that further words were meaningless.

"Now this hasn't happened for a long time...Wanna fight?"

"...Very well."

Fictional armament—Siegfried.

I tossed the Nergal in my hand to the ground and formed a weightless ornamental gun of dark matter. Mitsuki also raised her iridescent bow.

I could not use Nergal in a fight against Mitsuki because she probably would not want to see me like that.

Hence, I was going to confront her as Mononobe Yuu of Midgard, as Mitsuki's older brother. I knew very well that Siegfried was not suitable for combat against humans, but I had no choice but to go the whole way with it.

Feeling a fight about to break out, Iris panicked.

"Mononobe and Mitsuki-chan, you can't fight! Now's not the time for that—"

"No, now's exactly the time for that."

"No, now is exactly the time for that."

Mitsuki's words and mine overlapped.

"This stubborn little sister won't be persuaded by words alone."

"Obstinate beyond hope, Nii-san refuses to listen unless I do this."

I aimed Siegfried's muzzle at Mitsuki.

Mitsuki also nocked a black arrow of dark matter on her bow.

"Mitsuki."

"What is the matter, Nii-san?"

"I've been wanting to tell you this... Your panties are showing, you know?"

"—!?"

Going red in the face, Mitsuki frantically held down the hem of her skirt.

I could not possibly miss that opening.

Siegfried was limited to a maximum of three shots of dark matter bullets. Once depleted, the fictional armament would disappear. Attacking again required Siegfried to be recreated, which would present a massive opening, hence bullets must not be wasted, however—

While building the picture in my mind, I fired a bullet filled with two shots worth of dark matter.

"Cage Bullet!"

The black bullet transmuted in front of Mitsuki, forming a small metal cage. Due to my low generating capacity, the iron bars were quite slim but at least I managed to make a cage large enough to surround Mitsuki.

Weighed down by the metal cage in addition to her own weight, Mitsuki fell to the ground, but using the wind enveloping her body, Mitsuki landed gently just as she was about to contact the ground.

"Not only staring at other's panties but also conducting a sneak attack... Your methods are truly underhanded, Nii-san. But this is not enough to catch me, you know?"

Readying her bow from inside the cage, Mitsuki called out sharply:

"Self-destruct."

The instant the small arrows struck the cage, the iron bars cracked and fell apart in pieces.

"That was a spear imbued with matter with the concept of destruction, capable of forcibly altering the state of any object it strikes. A high-level skill, but Leviathan handled it using the method of amputation."

Mitsuki explained calmly while nocking the next arrow to the bow.

In a contest of abilities as a D, I had no chance of winning.

But from the very start, I never expected the metal cage to trap Mitsuki. The point of the earlier attack was to drag her down to ground level. Because I could not do anything to her while she was flying in the air, I had to do this as the initial step of attacking, even if it meant consuming two shots worth of dark matter.

Just as I predicted, Mitsuki landed on the ground. I dashed towards her.

Mitsuki simply narrowed her eyes and spoke briefly.

"Adhesive restraint."

The fired arrow turned translucent orange mid-flight before spreading out explosively. She had most likely transmuted dark matter into an adhesive net.

Deciding it was too late to evade, I raised Siegfried.

This was the last shot.

Mitsuki was not going to give me the time to create my fictional armament again. Hence, this transmutation was going to decide the victor.

"Red Bullet!"

I pulled the trigger, transmuting all the dark matter remaining in the fictional armament. Although Siegfried vanished, taking its place was something hard gripped in my right hand.

What I had transmuted was air that had been compressed into the shape of a knife. By raising the compression ratio, the knife's tip gave off high heat, producing a red afterimage.

This principle was the same as the air bullet I used during the test, but did not require the same difficult tuning. All I needed was heat sufficient to melt through the adhesive substance.

Using the high-temperature blade of air, I sliced Mitsuki's net.

Almost virtually unimpeded, I ripped apart the net before me that was about to cover me.

Mitsuki's expression turned even more solemn.

"Nii-san, you will get hurt if you continue to resist. First arrow—Forked Wind!"

Probably deciding it was impossible to capture me without causing injury, Mitsuki's gaze changed. She looked like she intended to use her prided technique.

While Mitsuki shot the arrow, the atmosphere's flow changed. The air gradually contracted. I tried to judge their number through wind currents, but the number of contraction points were too many for me to grasp completely.

Mitsuki's move was most likely the same as mine, an attack based on compressed air.

But the difference in level was too great. Her volume of transmutation could be described as horrifying.

Countless arrows of wind approached me.

It was virtually impossible to evade attacks that were invisible in the first place. Besides, they were too numerous, there were no gaps for dodging.

Impossible for a human, but if it was Fafnir—

—Just this one instant!

"!"

I gritted my teeth and switched modes again. My consciousness accelerated while the air currents read by my skin were added to my visual data.

This time, I understood.

The fired arrows of air—I could see them.

They numbered roughly a hundred.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

I dodged and squeezed past those arrows. Those I could not dodge, I severed them with my high-temperature blade.

Breaking through the curtain of projectiles head on, I approached Mitsuki.

Meanwhile, she was staring in wide-eyed surprise.

I swung the knife of air. Just as it was about to touch her, I made the knife gasify and dissipate—

—Then I applied a light chop on Mitsuki's head.

"Ow!?"

"First person to touch the other's head wins. That's the rule we agreed for our fights. Noncompliance means severing our relationship, even as siblings, do you still remember?"

"...Yes."

Mitsuki rubbed her forehead and nodded.

"Leave the matter of Iris to me."

"..."

However, she did not nod this time. Judging from Mitsuki's eyes, she was even prepared to break this fighting rule between siblings.

"It's fine if you still can't accept things. But through the fight just now, I'm sure you understand, right? Mitsuki, you can't stop me."

"That is..."

"There's no point arguing further about who's going to kill Iris. Instead, why don't we struggle and fight back to the bitter end?"

Just as I asked that, Iris exclaimed in surprise while looking in the sea's direction.

"Ah..."

Mitsuki and I followed Iris' gaze.

On the other end of the destroyed laser units, the horizon was shaking nonstop. A giant silhouette was floating there like a mirage.

Small explosions happened there with bright flashes.

"Leviathan... has finally invaded to here—"

Mitsuki groaned with a grave expression.

Perhaps it was advancing quite quickly. The figure grew huge in the blink of an eye.

Because it was too massive, it was hard to judge the distance. Its outer shell of pure white was dotted with

red, probably bleeding from the wounds caused by Midgardsormr and the Counter-Dragon Squad.

Uooooooooooooooooooooooo!

A deep and sonorous cry reverberated everywhere. Iris was holding her flank. Even through her clothing, one could see her dragon mark glowing brightly.

"It's calling me... It's crying that it wants me—"

Perhaps resonating with Leviathan's consciousness, Iris murmured as though in a trance.

"So the theory of seeking a mate is correct."

"Yeah... Looks like it."

Iris nodded, her body trembling.

"So, what are your plans?"

"Huh?"

"Men are idiots. If you stay silent, they'll take it as a hint of acceptance and go further, you know?"

Originally distracted, Iris suddenly regained vigor in her eyes.

"...I won't forgive dragons. I can't tolerate that thing taking away all the people dear to me, even wanting to take me as well!"

Iris yelled loudly, creating her fictional armament in her right hand—Caduceus.

"Can you hit it from here?"

"Although it's quite far, I'll try! I will bombard with my maximum generating capacity!"

Pointing the staff's tip at Leviathan, Iris concentrated while chanting her usual incantation.

"Mitsuki, just to be safe, could you contact the Counter-Dragon Squad nearby and tell them to keep their distance?"

I could only see small dots from here but numerous Ds were flying in Leviathan's surroundings. As soon as Iris attacked, they might get caught in the blast by accident.

Mitsuki nodded in agreement despite looking like she had something to say. She pressed a button on the communicator on her neck.

"—This is B3. All units retreat to Hypothetical Level A blast proximity and continue attacking from a distance."

Mitsuki issued the command. The Counter-Dragon Squad in the distance instantly changed their movements and left Leviathan.

"Okay, Iris, do it!"

"Great! O holy silver! Explode!"

Silver-white explosions suddenly appeared near the giant body swimming in the sky afar.

Pushed by the explosive blasts, Leviathan's body tilted slightly.

"Damage report?"

Mitsuki asked through the communicator.

'—Widespread damage caused to target's left side, but apparently did not reach deep.'

I heard the voice responding on the communicator.

Mitsuki exhaled and disconnected.

"Sure enough... This happened. Leviathan can create repulsive fields inside its own body. Even explosions could detonate near the skin, the damage will not reach the important internal organs. That type of ability is truly too omnipotent."

"But this is better than attacks that don't hit. And it definitely wears down its stamina. Iris, continue attacking. As for me—I won't hold back anymore."

Saying that, I extended my left hand to Mitsuki.

"...What is it, Nii-san?"

"Lend me your power, Mitsuki. If I have to do the same thing I did three years ago, I need to borrow dark matter from another D."

"I knew it was this requirement... Three years, you were able to perform such a massive transmutation only because I was at your side."

While talking about this subject yesterday, Mitsuki had already guessed the requirement. She made a look as though it was all expected.

"Yes, because I can't extract enough dark matter on my own."

"Against Leviathan... It is useless, right?"

"...Probably. Even so, it's far better than giving up without trying."

I gazed into Mitsuki's eyes while I spoke.

"Nii-san... You are so unfair. You are making the same face as back then... the time when you enacted a miracle. Now you are making me want to believe you, are you not...?"

Smiling wryly, Mitsuki held my hand.

"Thank you, Mitsuki."

I thanked her then shifted somewhere slightly farther from Iris. Closing my eyes, out of all the blueprints in my mind, I picked out the one I had used three years ago.

No, calling it a blueprint would not be accurate, because this contained all sorts of information including materials and methods of usage.

—The most sharpened power, in other words, data on weapons.

That was the truth of the power I had obtained in the deal with "Green" Yggdrasil three years ago. My ability to materialize Nergal and other firearms was not the result of training but because the correct data was engraved in my mind.

But because the volume of information was far too great, it could not all fit into my memory.

Back when I was about to lose this personality of Mononobe Yuu, I had cut the link to Yggdrasil halfway through.

However—Even so, severing the link was still too late.

Scrubbed by the turbulent flow of information, I had lost several key elements as Mononobe Yuu.

I lacked the emotion of fear and lost part of my memories.

The day I arrived at Midgard, Mitsuki had advised me to contact my parents and friends, but I must not talk to them. Because as soon as we conversed, my memory loss would come to light and this would reach Mitsuki's ears eventually.

With that, Mitsuki would surely blame herself very much.

Hence, I absolutely must not let the truth come to light .

The only memories kept intact in my heart were just the ones with Mitsuki.

Hence, Mitsuki was the one person I must not allow sorrow to come to her.

"Anti-dragon armament—Marduk!"

I constructed the weapon I had shot Hekatonkheir three years ago. The blueprint was burning in my mind. Borrowing dark matter flowing into my body from Mitsuki, the giant barrow gradually took form.

Rather than cutting-edge weaponry of the modern era, this was a lost weapon from a *pre-civilization* that existed long ago.

I only learned after receiving this power that there once existed an era with even more advanced science and technology than the current civilization. All the weaponry data I received from Yggdrasil, including Nergal, were things that had existed in the distant past.

Hence, I participated in NIFL's weapons development. The ones adopted were the mass production models of Nergal and Ishtar, the ICBM Gáe Bolg and the tactical laser. These all made use of pre-civilization technology.

However—This Marduk was an exception, a weapon that could not be reproduced with modern science and technology no matter what.

Originally attacking continually, Iris stared in wide-eyed amazement in my direction.

The barrow, ten-odd meters long, a base with circuits and wires exposed. Even by borrowing Mitsuki's power, it was impossible to recreate completely, so only the minimum necessary components were constructed. Hence, it could only fire one shot. Because no cooling functionality was installed, the barrow would melt.

The fatigue caused transmutation was unprecedented. My entire body felt heavy. My vision blurred. If I could still transmute again, it would be at most once more.

Connecting the the control system to my consciousness , I glared at Leviathan. The barrow shifted slightly on its own and adjusted its aim.

"—Nii-san, please wait! To prevent it from rebounding the attack, I will bait Leviathan into distorting space first! "

Mitsuki was stunned just now too, but she suddenly came to her senses and called to the Counter-Dragon Squad through her communicator.

"All units, pull back from the target again! B5, B6, dump matter downwards from the air with maximum generating capacity! Apply pressure to the target's handling capacity!"

'Roger that.'

'Mm.'

Hearing brief responses, I realized those were Ariella and Ren's voices.

Then giant blocks of rock and ice fell towards Leviathan but they were caught by a repulsive field, stopping in the air motionlessly.

"Spread out. B1 to the right, B2 to the left. Aim for the target's head with long-distance non-projectile attacks!"

'Understood!"

'...Roger that.'

This time, those were Lisa and Firill's voices. A thick laser beam appeared from the right side while an electrical attack appeared from the left, attacking Leviathan at the same time.

Although these attacks deviated due to spatial distortion, of course, Mitsuki discerned the laser and electrical attack's trail and said to me:

"Nii-san, now an attack from the front should not be deflected back. Please fire!"

"Okay—Fire!!"

I yelled forcefully from the bottom of my lungs.

BOOM!!

The atmosphere was distorted by the heavy cannon's rumbling. A bullet of blue-white light was fired. It was a weapon of annihilation that caused everything caught in its blast to disintegrate on the atomic level.

In the past, Hekatonkheir had instantly turned into dust after being struck by this bullet.

Due to Hekatonkheir's trait of immortality, even though it revived several hundred kilometers away afterwards, this weapon's firepower was guaranteed.

The blue bullet flew towards Leviathan in a straight line, but the instant before striking—Its path was altered from spatial distortion, deviating to the lower left.

In that very instant, blinding blue light erupted. This was because I had adjusted the energy compression ratio

while firing. Even if it failed to strike, it would still explode next to Leviathan.

The pillar of blue light devoured Leviathan.

The blocks of rock and ice made by Ariella and Ren also disappeared in the light.

Making contact with the light, a large piece of the sea surface was gouged away. The surrounding seawater evaporated from the high temperature. Like cumulonimbus clouds, thick water vapor rose upwards.

—Please, let it work!

I squinted, praying that it had destroyed Leviathan successfully.

Uooooooooooooooooooooooo!

Angry roar was heard from the light, making me realize I had failed just when victory was in sight again.

The white monster emerged, breaking through the blue light and the cloud of water vapor. The left side of its outer shell was almost completely blown away, exposing muscle. Even so, its movements did not seem

impeded. Swaying its body, Leviathan swam in the air, approaching the final defensive line.

No longer concerned with the intercepting lasers, it headed straight for here, where Iris was.

The lost weapon that stood as my trump card had already melted from the heat of firing into a distorted and ordinary lump of scrap metal. Although it seemed like it had damaged Leviathan to some extent, who knew how many dozens of additional shot were needed if one wanted to defeat the dragon in this manner, also... I had neither that much time nor energy.

"So in the end... It is no good."

Mitsuki murmured in despair.

Her face no longer showed the fortitude from three years ago that could be called recklessness.

Simply staring at reality, she silently gave up resistance.

If standing from the Counter-Dragon Squad's perspective, it was necessary to recognize the current situation correctly, but the expression on Mitsuki's face filled me with sorrow.

I hoped Mitsuki could say it.

That she did not want this type of outcome.

With that, I would be able to—

"Go away... Go away! I hate... guys like you!"

At this moment, Iris' voice reached my ears.

Under despairing conditions, she was facing forward alone, continuing to fight as hard as she could.

Not giving up at all, she continued to resist.

"O holy silver! Explode! Explode! Explode—!!"

Silver-white explosions kept detonating in Leviathan's surroundings.

But it did not stop. No matter how much the surface of its body was blasted, as long as the repulsive field was present, it would not receive a lethal wound.

The image of Iris screaming and resisting desperately overlapped with my memory of Mitsuki three years ago.

Badump, I felt the depths of my heart shake.

"Ahhh... I guess there's no way I can leave her alone."

I smiled wryly and said, letting go of Mitsuki's hand.

"Nii-san?"

Mitsuki looked at me uneasily.

"—Mitsuki, no matter what happens, I will still be your brother."

I told her that, as though trying to carve these words into my heart.

"Nii-san, what on earth are you talking about...? Why are you mentioning something so obvious?"

"You're right, this is obvious. Because it's obvious, that's why I... must never forget."

Despite having lost the feeling of fear, my body was trembling.

I smiled at Mitsuki then walked over to Iris' side.

"...Mononobe?"

Iris stopped moving her hand to attack relentlessly then looked at me with tears brimming in her eyes.

"Iris, can I borrow your power this time?"

"Mononobe... You're still not killing me?"

"Yes, according to our promise, even if I really have to kill you, Iris, it's when all else fails, right?"

"Right now... Isn't that time yet?"

Iris asked with a tearful smile.

"No, not yet, I still have things I can do!"

I held Iris' right hand tightly with my left hand.

Then I glared at Leviathan which had arrived above the final defensive line.

I searched for the circuits I had severed in the past, the circuits I had severed to protect myself.

Continue the deal, Yggdrasil, we must defeat the dragon this time!

—Reconnection, acknowledged—

I heard a faint voice. It was Yggdrasil's emotionless voice from three years ago.

Hence, I followed the voice and connected the threads of my consciousness to that place.

Then the interrupted flow of information started up again and I searched it for weapons to break out of the current predicament.

I felt a splitting headache.

A massive amount of information was devouring my consciousness.

I had no idea what I would lose this time, what I would forget, and whether I would remain as myself.

Even so, possibilities only existed inside this information!

"Ugh..."

The burgeoning volume of information poured into my brain. My head felt as though it was about to explode .

But amidst all that, I was able to catch glimpses of what I sought.

It was information that could supplement the data of Marduk, the anti-dragon armament. Only then did I find out that the cannon I had materialized was merely one part of it.

So Marduk was incomplete—

But I was at my limit. My consciousness started to grow hazy.

—Disconnect!

I severed the circuits before I lost consciousness. Although it was impossible to contain all of Marduk's information, I managed to secure the necessary portion.

I began to ask myself, in exchange for the obtained information, what have I lost?

I remember about Iris beside me. I was fighting to protect her.

I remember about Mitsuki, standing slightly farther from us. My real sister beyond a doubt. Ever since the past which I could not recall, we grew up together. Separated for the past three years, we finally reunited here at Midgard.

Then hovering in the sky, the white dragon—Leviathan—was the enemy that must be defeated.

No problem, I remembered everything essential right now.

I had not lost the reason for fighting.

Then extending my right arm sideways, I called out the name of what I wanted to create.

"Marduk, *main cannon*—Babel!!"

Using the dark matter flowing to me from Iris, I constructed a giant turret again.

But the shape was different from earlier. The transmutation performed this time was another part from the supplemented blueprint of Marduk. The barrel was split into two with a lens-like device in the middle. Considering my remaining stamina, this was my last transmutation. Failure would be the end.

Uooooooooooooooooooo!

Perhaps seeing the pre-civilization weapon aimed at it, Leviathan roared deeply.

"This must succeed no matter what—FIRE!!"

A black torrent was shot out, seeming as though it would push the target into darkness, this endless darkness expanded drastically, even to the point of enveloping Leviathan's gigantic body.

The black-looking portion was not matter but a spatial discontinuity that even light was devoured, a supergravitational singularity.

Babel was a weapon that tore space to crush everything existing within the range of its attack.

However, the realm of darkness, which was meant to devour the target instantly to lock it away, still remained in an open state.

Uooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo...

Leviathan screamed.

It was using antigravity to oppose supergravity.

Insufficient output. Overloaded, the barrel was suffering small-scale explosions all over the place.

—I knew it already. Even this would still be unable to succeed.

If this weapon could defeat dragons, then the old civilization would have persisted to the present day. But in the modern era, they did not exist anywhere, most likely destroyed by dragons.

Hence, it was impossible to prevail over dragon through my power.

The objective would not by achieved by this strike of mine.

"Mitsuki! Attack!!"

"...Yes!"

Mitsuki nodded in acknowledgement, creating her fictional armament in her hand

"Brionac!"

On the brightly iridescent bow, Mitsuki nocked an arrow of dark matter.

Indeed, it would hit given the current situation. Only when supergravity and antigravity were locked in a struggle!

"Terminating Arrow—Last Quark!"

This was surely the antimatter that only Mitsuki could generate, the arrow that had slain two Krakens.

While firing that arrow, Mitsuki yelled through the communicator.

"All units—Attack!!"

The Counter-Dragon Squad fired dozens of attacks, piercing Leviathan from the sides.

Then Mitsuki's arrow penetrated from the front.

Instantly, with blinding explosion of pure white, Leviathan's entire body bulged from within.

"Just a bit more, Iris!!"

"Okay!"

Although Iris should be trying her hardest already, she delivered even more dark matter to me.

Using her dark matter, I patched up Babel which was nearing destruction. Prepared for the possibility that the

barrel might overheat, I forced it to bring out firepower beyond its limit.

Leviathan's gigantic body, which was originally expanding, now contracted.

Compressed by the surrounding supergravity, it contracted smaller and smaller, accompanied by explosions.

Uooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!

Even its roaring deathcry was dragged into the spatial discontinuity, its voice growing progressively weaker.

After devouring the giant dragon and the antimatter explosions, the space closed up.

Almost at the same time, Babel reached its limit and collapsed with a small explosion.

Originally blotting the sky, the giant body disappeared . The vast blue sky reappeared over our heads.

"Did we... succeed?"

The first to speak was Iris.

With an expression of disbelief, she stared at the spot where Leviathan had just occupied.

"We won...?"

Still in her arrow firing posture, Mitsuki was frozen.

A warm southerly wind blew between us.

"R-Right, Iris! Show me what's under your clothing!"

Brought back to reality, I thought of a way to confirm the victory, so I set about lifting Iris' shirt.

"Kyawah!? M-Mononobe, what are you suddenly doing!? Oh, no... not somewhere so bright... Mitsuki-chan's looking too..."

"Hey, no—I just want to see your flank..."

Because Iris resisted inexplicably, twisting her body, we wrestled together, falling to the ground in a tangle.

Because Iris' shirt was lifted while she fell, the snow-white complexion of her flank became exposed.

The dragon mark, there to begin with, had returned to a flesh tone slightly darker than the surrounding skin.

"The dragon mark whose color changed has reverted... We succeeded, we really succeeded!"

I cried out with joy but suddenly realized my right hand was holding something soft.

"Umm, Mononobe... It's very embarrassing for me, don't... grope so hard."

"Ehhhh!?"

Reeling back in surprise, I unintentionally moved my hand, causing Iris to cry out in an inexplicably sexy manner.

Then I felt someone patting my shoulder from behind.

I looked back in trepidation, only to see Mitsuki smiling, looking at me.

"—Nii-san, how unbelievable that you dare to openly engage in inappropriate interactions between the genders , right in front of me, the student body president."

"No, it was an accident just now..."

"Accident? What I saw was you lunging at Iris-san, removing her clothing forcibly then groping her chest, did you not?"

"Somehow... It feels like you're making me out to be a vile irredeemable pervert by describing things that way."

"Precisely indeed, pervert Nii-san."

"Hey—OWWWWWW!"

Dragging me by the ear, Mitsuki separated me from Iris.

Blushing to her ears, Iris fixed up her clothing while watching me.

"Umm, uh... Sorry, Mononobe, if it's somewhere without other people seeing, I... Oh, right! Next time, let me help you scrub your back again!"

"Again...?"

Hearing what Iris said, Mitsuki glared at me with eyes of ice.

"Uh, this is a long story—"

"I see, then I shall listen to you properly afterwards, Nii-san. I still have plenty to say regarding your insubordination just now. Nii-san, you would do best to prepare yourself. A hundred repentance essays are inescapable."

Making a terrifying declaration with a smile, Mitsuki held my hand with a tight grip.

"I absolutely will not allow you to escape, got that—Nii-san?"

Epilogue

I had a dream.

Drifting in the seabed of slumber where everything was ambiguous, I looked out to a scene in the distance that did not exist in memory.

"Yuu-kun, wait up!"

"You're too slow, Mitsuki!"

But Mitsuki never called me "Yuu-kun."

So this must be a fantasy created by my own mind.

Only just a dream.

"If you run so quickly, be careful not to tire out before we reach the observation platform."

Hearing a voice from behind, I looked back to see four adults with gentle smiles on their faces.

Two of them were probably my father and mother, while the remaining two... I think I've seen them before, but could not remember.

"Don't worry, this is nothing!"

I acted tough and sped up, running up the slope.

"Yuu-kun, don't leave me behind!"

Mitsuki cried out pitifully, desperately chasing after me.

In this way, we left the adults behind and reached the observation platform at the peak.

The two of us were panting heavily. Large beads of sweat seeped out from our foreheads.

There was no one in the observation platform's surroundings. Only cicadas were making a noisy racket.

"What a surprise... The buildings became so small."

I looked at the scenery over the railing and exclaimed in joy.

"Can you see our home?"

Showing excitement in her eyes, Mitsuki searched for our home.

"Should be around there, right? See, that's the rain shelter in the shopping street."

"Eh... Where? I can't see it!"

Leaning against her shoulder, I pointed into the distance. Mitsuki and I carved the sight of our town into our hearts and retinas.

Mitsuki looked like she was in a good mood. Seeing her dazzling smile, the young me asked her if something good happened.

"Yeah, because I kept up with Yuu-kun today! You usually leave me behind all the time, don't you know that hurts my feelings?"

"That's because you're too slow."

"I'm not slow. I finally caught up today. From now on, we'll stay together forever and ever!"

Saying that, Mitsuki hugged my arm.

"D-Don't do that, it's very stuffy. What do you mean, stay together forever and ever? That's impossible!"

"Why is it impossible? As long as we get married, even if we turn into old people, we'll still be together forever!"

Mitsuki replied with an innocent smile.

"What are you talking about? Don't you know kids can't get married?"

"I know, that's why I'll settle for being a fiancee until we become adults."

Hearing her declare so openly, I was stunned with surprise. At this time, Mitsuki silently drew her face near .

The soft touch of lips.

"Wha..."

I was too surprised to speak.

"This is the kiss of engagement, Yuu-kun."

Blushing red, Mitsuki smiled.

Then the world went white.

The scene viewed from afar gradually drifted away.

—Ahhh, why am I having such a dream?

This kind of episode did not exist in my memory. That meant it was a dream created out of my desire.

Nevertheless... Even though it was clearly an embarrassing dream that could only be taken as a joke... Why did my chest hurt so much?

Why did I feel so much sorrow that I wanted to scream and yell?

I reached for the scenery in the dream, gradually drifting away.

But I could not touch it.

I could never touch it again.

I could not even remember what kind of dream I had dreamt.

—What on earth did I lose?

Even if I asked this question, no one would answer me .

Even if I searched, the answer would not be found.

All I knew was that this was something extremely important. Only this one fact was beyond a doubt.

—It was probably too late.

Unable to withstand the intense feeling of loss, I turned my back to my own dream.

Then I floated up from the sea of slumber.

Next... Even forgetting this incident of "having lost something," I opened my eyes.

"You finally woke up, Nii-san."

Sitting on the bed's edge, Mitsuki gazed down at me. The setting sun was shining through the window, dyeing the room a shade of red.

"...Mitsuki?"

Hearing me call her name, my younger sister showed a helpless smile.

"I know the battle yesterday exhausted you greatly, Nii-san, but there should be limits in refusing to get out of bed, you know? It is almost dinner time."

"I slept for that long...?"

I sat up in surprise.

Immediately, I felt something cold slide down my face.

"Hmm...?"

I touched it with a finger. My face was wet.

Mitsuki looked at my face worriedly.

"Nii-san... Are you crying?"

"No, the tears fell on their own... Probably because I just woke up."

I wiped the tears away with the back of my hand and smiled at Mitsuki.

"I hope so... If you find any unusual symptoms in your body, you must speak out, okay? Because you were seriously too reckless yesterday, Nii-san."

"...I know."

Seeing me nod in agreement, Mitsuki got up from the bed and walked to the door.

I should have locked the door, so Mitsuki must have entered using the master key.

But having slept for so long, it was normal for her to check up on me due to worry.

"So, Nii-san, I will be waiting for you at the dining hall ."

"Yeah, I'll be there in a sec."

I watched Mitsuki exit the room after I replied.

Seeing her leave, for some reason, I felt a slight prick inside my chest.

Water dripped onto the bedsheets.

My tears still had not stopped.

*

'—Good job, 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe. Believing in you turned out to be correct. Thanks to you stopping those impetuous fellows, "White" Leviathan was taken out. I am truly grateful to you now that this threat is no longer left unhandled.'

On the screen of the portable terminal, Major Loki spoke with a cheerful smile.

The venue was my room.

After having dinner with Mitsuki, I suddenly received Major Loki's call while I was resting.

Although I had plenty of complaints for him, he suddenly thanked me at the very start, making me lose my opportunity to speak.

Major Loki was always like that.

He never let the other side take control of the pace.

"Sure... Thanks."

As though I was thinking "how could you say that shamelessly," I still feigned respect on the surface and saluted him.

Major Loki must have considered both of two cases.

As long as I stayed clear of interfering, that would be best.

If I intervened, then backed into a corner, I would surely finish the job.

He must have been certain of that.

And he most likely predicted the latter to be more likely, hence he goaded someone else to take action.

The NIFL leader who had sent that team was perhaps Major Loki's rival opposing his interests. Although this incident did not get blown up into a huge deal, that person might be forced to take responsibility and lose influence.

—Supposing things happened as I imagined it was only natural that he did not send out the real Sleipnir.

Because Major Loki could not possibly send out his team on a mission that was presumed to fail.

'I believe that results are everything. No matter what the process, as long as the result approaches the best outcome, then the action you took is the correct one. As long as you maintain correctness, I will believe in you and praise you. If there's anything you want, please feel free to speak up. I will grant you a favor no matter what it is. Think of it as the reward for this job.'

"No... I don't have anything I want right now, so let me think about it."

'I see, then tell me once you've thought of something. But before long, Midgardsormr will be restored and the next time we can communicate will be another crisis. So, I'm still counting on you here on—My Fafnir."

The call ended with disturbing words.

If possible, I really did not want to see him again, but that was probably impossible.

I sighed gloomily. Just as I was about to lie down in bed, the terminal's screen indicated incoming mail.

"..."

After reading the contents, I stood up.

I had to go outside but it was near curfew time. I guess I should give Mitsuki a heads up in person before going out today.

I left my room and went up the second floor stairs.

As soon as I opened the door to the room that Mitsuki usually used, I saw Mitsuki look up from reading on the sofa, glaring at me disapprovingly.

"—I know that leaving the door unlocked is my oversight, Nii-san, but you should knock before entering, should you not?"

"Who cares? We're siblings so there's no need to be concerned about that, right?"

"...Huh?"

Mitsuki stared at me with extreme surprise.

"Hmm? Did I say something weird?"

"No... Nothing, you just feel different from before, Nii-san..."

"Really? I think I've always been like this, oh, Mitsuki—I need to go out for a bit right now."

"Going out is fine... But the curfew is 8pm, remember?"

"I know. Then I'm off."

"...Take care, Nii-san."

Until the very end, Mitsuki showed a very troubled expression but unable to figure out what was wrong no matter how much I pondered, I could only tilt my head in puzzlement.

Leaving the dorm, I looked up to see the sky filled with stars as far as the eye could see.

On a night several days before, I seemed to have gone out at this kind of hour as well.

While I was thinking this and faced forward again, I saw a shadow quivering near the door.

"What...?"

I frowned and approached, only to hear what sounded like people arguing in whispers.

"...H-Hey, could you not push? He will discover our presence!"

"...I think there's no need for us to hide."

I quietly looked outside the door to see my classmates pushing one another.

It was Lisa, Firill, Ren and Ariella. All classes were suspended today, but everyone was dressed in uniform.

"Are you looking for Mitsuki?"

I thought they probably came for school or student council business, so I asked that.

"N-No! P-Purely coincidence! We all happened to pass by during a stroll in the evening! Nothing more than that !"

Lisa glared at me, looking particularly flustered.

"...No, we came to check on your condition. Lisa invited all of us."

Firill quietly corrected Lisa.

"My condition...?"

Feeling surprised, I looked at Lisa to seek confirmation . Turning red, she looked away.

"Mm."

Ren tugged my clothing then showed me her terminal's screen.

'Mitsuki-chan contacted us to say you did not wake up the whole time.'

"O-Ohhh... Because I was totally exhausted yesterday."

After performing two transmutations beyond my own generating capacity, I was apparently quite tired out. By the time I woke up, it was already almost dinner time.

But judging from the conversation earlier, Mitsuki had wanted to rouse me from bed even earlier, But in spite of that, I remained soundly asleep, which was probably why she discussed with the others.

After hearing my answer, Ren typed on the terminal then showed it to me.

'Seeing you are so lively, our visit was a waste of effort .'

"...So you were that worried about me. Thank you, everyone."

Putting my hand on Ren's head, I thanked them.

"Hua!?"

Turning bright red, Ren brushed my hand off and hid behind Ariella.

"—You really are quite thoughtless. A girl's head isn't something you touch casually."

Ariella sighed.

"Sorry, because her height is just right, I did it without thinking..."

"Without thinking huh... Whatever, Ren doesn't seem angry, so I'll let you off this time."

"...She's not angry?"

Looking at Ren's pouting face behind Ariella, I asked her that.

"She's just shy. She bites when she's angry, so be careful."

"...Got it, I'll be very careful."

I nodded respectfully. At this point, Lisa interrupted:

"Mononobe Yuu! Since we met by chance, there is something I shall tell you while I am here!"

"...You're still insisting it's by chance?"

Firill poked fun at her quietly. Lisa ignored her and continued:

"Rumor has it that yesterday's black light which halted Leviathan's movement was your doing... Is that true?"

"Oh... Yeah, well, it's true."

Judging from the fact that she called it a rumor, I guess what I did had not been publicized.

Telling the truth might lead to trouble... But I somehow felt hesitant towards lying in response to Lisa's question.

Probably because her eyes were very serious.

"So it is true... Then it cannot be helped."

Lisa crossed her arms and sighed deeply.

"Cannot be helped?"

"Indeed, your accomplishment of saving our family must be commended concretely. Hence, I hereby promote you to 'probationary classmate'!"

Pointing at me, Lisa declared.

"You said promote... Then what was I before?"

"Of course you were just an outsider!"

Seeing her assert that in such a matter-of-fact expression, I slumped my shoulders dejectedly.

"Well... Although it's better than being an outsider, so I still can't become a classmate?"

"Of course, if you thought you could become a classmate so easily, you are sorely mistaken. Please work hard!"

After saying that, Lisa turned to Firill and the others.

"Very well, everyone, let us return. The dorm supervisor will be angry if we don't hurry."

"Okay... We're of now. See you tomorrow."

Firill lowered her head and bowed to me.

Ren turned her face away while Ariella waved to me, then they walked away.

Seeing the four of them off, I then went in the opposite direction.

It felt good to be acknowledged.

While I felt my mood become relaxed, I walked along my way.

Following the same route, I came to the beach where I first met her.

The silver-haired girl who had called me out was still standing at the water's edge with her feet immersed in seawater.

A line of footprints extended from the breakwater all the way to her current location.

"—Iris."

With longer strides than the girl—Iris—I walked across the beach, calling her name.

"Mononobe... Sorry for calling you out again."

"No worries. What is it this time?"

"The same thing as last time."

Iris smiled and approached me.

"The same?"

"Yes... What we didn't finish talking about last time."

Iris nodded and gazed directly into my eyes—Then she continued and said:

"Umm... Can we be friends... Mononobe?"

Hearing this question, my mouth gaped open in surprise.

"What are you talking about? Iris, we're already friends long ago."

"Eh? No way! When did I become friends with you, Mononobe?"

"Uh, I don't know how to answer even if you ask me when... I saw you as a friend very early on!"

Hearing my answer, Iris exhaled deeply.

"Mononobe, you... always give me what I want the most, so surely, you..."

"Huh?"

Because her voice was too quiet, I could not quite catch the latter half.

"Nothing, it's nothing! Putting that aside, I have to somehow reward you this time."

With cheeks blushing red, Iris came even closer to me and made a gentle smile.

"...Thank you, Mononobe."

Standing on tiptoe, Iris approached my face.

That moment—the gentle sensation from a mere instant's contact between lips—was the first I had ever experienced in my life.

その時——ほんの一瞬だけ触れ合った唇の柔らかさは、俺が人生で初めて知るものだっ
た。

Afterword

This is Tsukasa. By the effects of a miraculous coincidence, I was given this chance to write for Kodansha Bunko.

The project planning started roughly from February then it felt like the days simply zoomed past after that.

Anyway, I just wanted to write a story featuring dragons!

It was discussing this kind of topic with my editor, with both of us exchanging many ideas, that the story's skeleton took form. With immense speed, I wrote an outline then focused singlemindedly on writing the book itself. Before I knew it, this *Unlimited Fafnir* series was born.

As it happened at the time, I had also moved house from Kyoto to Tokyo. Those were such hectic days but each and every day was filled with new experiences.

Whether writing a new story or starting a new life, I looked forward greatly to both of them.

Seeing the birth of characters that did not exist originally, gradually weaving a plot, that kind of excitement simply cannot be expressed in words.

In real life, I am also experiencing new things every day. Like wandering around because I couldn't find my house, trying to take a shortcut but ending up somewhere completely different, or taking a different route for a change of pace but taking a huge detour.

...Well, I suppose I simply get lost easily. I really need to fix my poor sense of direction.

Also, after moving house, something unbelievable happened.

On a certain day, I dreamed that... I was not only lost but my glasses were also broken. Standing in the streets, unable to take a step, I could only text my friends for help—This kind of terrifying dream.

However, glasses breaking doesn't happen so easily. Although it felt like an ominous premonition, I treated it as paranoia and continued with life optimistically.

But a few days later, when I was on the road, my glasses suddenly BROKE APART!

I had used those glasses since my student days, so I guess it must have reached the end of its life.

After that, I finally managed to get home on my home, but walking on unfamiliar streets, unable to to focus my vision on anything farther than a meter away, it really was quite a thrilling adventure.

Now that I think back, my glasses did exhibit some weird loosening, perhaps my body had sensed those subtle changes to warn me through a dream.

A so-called premonition might perhaps have some unexpected basis. No, I'm serious.

...Somehow, I don't have much space left to write, so let me start the acknowledgements.

Korie Riko-sensei, who draws the most awesome and beautiful illustrations for this series, I am truly grateful to you!

Iris is super cute. Although the smile on the cover is very attractive, I personally prefer the angry look on the inset page. Mitsuki and Lisa also turned out more adorable than I imagined. I am so moved!

Editor in charge, Shouji-sama, back when we first me, you were exuding such an extraordinary aura, with astounding speed, giving me precise advice, guiding the story to a higher dimension within the blink of an eye. I am truly moved to tears by your abilities. While promoting this series, you even had a website made specially for this book, I am so grateful to you. I am extremely happy and I offer you my utmost respect. Here on, please continue to look after me.

Then there is Konoe Ototsugu-sama who lent me plenty of assistance this time, everyone involved in binding, quality assurance and sales who worked dutifully for this book to be released, as well as all staff related to this series, and last but not least, all the essential readers who bought and read this book, I hereby offer you my sincere thanks!

Well then, see you next time.

Tsukasa, May 2013

Illustrator's Afterword

あとがき

■初めまして！挿絵担当の梱枝りこです～。ファンタジーバトルものの挿絵描くのは初めてで、とても楽しかったです！2巻も楽しみです♪
個人的にイリスたんがお気に入り
なのですが、深月ちゃんも好きで、
あ、でもリーザさんも・・・（笑）

本命は悠くんですけど
ね！！！！（°∀°）

梱枝りこ

■Nice to meet you! I am Korie Riko, in charge of illustrations~ This is my first time drawing in a fantasy battle style, I'm enjoying it very much! I also look forward to the second volume♪

I really like Iris, but I also like Mitsuki-chan, oh, but Lisa-san too... (laugh)

But my true love is Yuu-kun, that's all!!!! (oo)

Korie Riko